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Bush Defends Use of Iraq Intelligence

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By TOM RAUM, Associated Press Writer

PRETORIA, South Africa - President Bush ([news - web sites](#)) on Wednesday defended his use of prewar intelligence on Iraq ([news - web sites](#)), saying he is "absolutely confident" in his actions despite the discovery that one claim he made about Saddam Hussein ([news - web sites](#))'s weapons pursuits was based on false information.



[AP Photo](#)

Democrats have argued that the White House's acknowledgment that Bush misspoke earlier this year when he said Saddam tried to buy uranium in Africa justifies a broad review of how the administration used prewar intelligence on Iraq.

Bush, at a news conference here with South African President Thabo Mbeki during a five-nation African tour, took on his critics.

"There's no doubt in my mind that when it's all said and done the facts will show the world the truth," he said. "There's going to be, you know, a lot of attempts to try to rewrite history, and I can understand that. But I'm absolutely confident in the decision I made."

Bush did not directly address the misstatement itself, made during his State of the Union address. Instead, he defended his decision to go to war based on a larger body of information.

"There is no doubt in my mind that Saddam Hussein was a threat to the world peace," the president said. "And there's no doubt in my mind that the United States ... did the right thing in removing him from power."

Back home, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld told the Senate Armed Services Committee ([news - web sites](#)) on Wednesday that the administration decided to use military force in Iraq because the information about the threat of Saddam's regime was seen with a different perspective after the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001.

"The coalition did not act in Iraq because we had discovered dramatic new evidence of Iraq's pursuit of weapons of mass murder," Rumsfeld said. "We acted because we saw the existing evidence in a new light through the prism of our experience on Sept. 11."

The uranium claim was raising concerns among Democrats, who said more was needed despite several investigations now under way in Congress.

"This is a very important admission," Senate Democratic Leader Tom Daschle of South Dakota said Tuesday. "It's a recognition that we were provided faulty information. And I think it's all the more reason why a full investigation of all of the facts surrounding this situation be undertaken."

Sen. Carl Levin of Michigan, the ranking Democrat on the Armed Services Committee, said: "The reported White House statements only reinforce the importance of an inquiry into why the information about the bogus uranium sales didn't reach the policy-makers during 2002 and why, as late as the president's State of the Union address in January 2003, our policy-makers were still using information which the intelligence community knew was almost certainly false."

The Bush administration used purported Iraqi weapons of mass destruction as a major justification for the war, and the failure to find such weapons so far has generated intense criticism from some Democrats.

White House spokesman Ari Fleischer ([news - web sites](#)) set off a furor Monday when, under questioning by reporters, he acknowledged that Bush was incorrect in his State of the Union speech when he said "the British government has learned that

Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa."

Wednesday, Fleischer said that "this type of information should not have risen to the level of a presidential speech."

But, he added, "this is a classic issue of hindsight is 20-20."

"There's a bigger picture here," Fleischer told reporters traveling with Bush to South Africa. He repeated administration assertions that Saddam Hussein was trying to



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reconstitute a weapons of mass destruction program.

Other White House officials elaborated on Fleischer's remarks Tuesday, saying the United States had additional evidence of Iraq's nuclear intentions.

Michael Anton, a spokesman for the National Security Council, said that when Bush made the speech, there was other intelligence indicating Iraq had tried to acquire uranium from several countries in Africa. This other information, however, was not detailed or specific enough to prove such a contention, he said.

The claim rested significantly on a letter or letters between officials in Iraq and Niger that were obtained by European intelligence agencies. The communications are now accepted as forged.

Anton acknowledged such on Tuesday, but also said the documents were not the sole basis for the Iraq-Africa statement in Bush's speech.

"Because of this lack of specificity, this reporting alone did not rise to the level of inclusion in a presidential speech," Anton said. "That said, the issue of Iraq's attempts to acquire uranium from abroad was not an element underpinning the judgment reached by most intelligence agencies that Iraq was reconstituting its nuclear weapons program."

On Sunday, Joseph Wilson, an envoy sent to Africa to investigate allegations about Iraq's nuclear weapons program, said the Bush administration manipulated his findings, possibly to strengthen the rationale for war.

Wilson insisted in an NBC-TV interview that his doubts about the purported Iraq-Niger connection reached the highest levels of government, including Vice President Dick Cheney ([news - web sites](#))'s office. In fact, he said, Cheney's office inquired about the purported Niger-Iraq link.

Fleischer said Monday that Cheney did not request information about Wilson's mission to Niger, was not informed of his mission and was not aware of it until press reports accounted for it.

Rep. Henry Waxman of California, the top Democrat on the House Government Reform Committee ([news - web sites](#)), wrote to Bush on Tuesday outlining a letter he received from the International Atomic Energy Agency regarding the forged Niger documents.

The letter "raises new questions about why the administration withheld the evidence from the IAEA for over six crucial weeks in December and January and — even then — failed to share the conclusions of U.S. intelligence officials that the evidence was bogus."

Democrats seeking their party's presidential nomination, including Sens. Bob Graham of Florida and John Kerry of Massachusetts and Reps. Richard Gephardt of Missouri and Dennis Kucinich of Ohio, also called for further investigation.

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