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The Buck Stops There

Bush shifts the blame for his Iraq whopper.
By William Saletan
Posted Monday, July 14, 2003, at 3:31 PM PT

When George W. Bush ran for president, one of his big selling points was responsibility. Americans were tired of Bill Clinton's fudges and legalisms. They were tired of hearing that the latest falsehood was part of a larger truth, or that it was OK because the president had attributed it to somebody else, or that the country should "move on." Bush promised to end all that. He promised an "era of responsibility" in which leaders and citizens would no longer "blame somebody else."

This month, Bush was given a chance to make good on those promises. In his [State of the Union address](#) earlier this year, he told Americans, "The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa." But in March, the [International Atomic Energy Agency](#) debunked the only public documentation for that claim. And on July 6, a U.S. emissary who had been sent to Niger to check out the principal basis of the claim disclosed in the *New York Times* that he had found—and had told the U.S. government more than a year ago—that "it was highly doubtful that any such transaction had ever taken place."

What do Bush and his aides have to say about this?

1. It's the CIA's fault. On Friday, in a joint briefing with White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice [emphasized](#) that the CIA had "cleared" Bush's speech. In case anyone missed the point, Rice repeated it nine times verbatim and another eight times indirectly. Hours later, a reporter asked Bush, "Can you explain how an erroneous piece of intelligence on the Iraq-Niger connection got into your State of the Union speech? Are you upset about it, and should somebody be held accountable?" Bush [replied](#) that the speech "was cleared by the intelligence services."

CIA Director George Tenet took a different approach. He didn't blame CIA underlings who had cleared the speech. "I am responsible for the approval process in my Agency," he [said](#).

The honorable step for Bush—who had often promised to restore honor to the White House—would have been to follow Tenet's example by declaring, "I am responsible for the approval process in my administration." Instead, Fleischer [told reporters](#) on Saturday, "The President is pleased that the Director of Central Intelligence acknowledged what needed to be acknowledged. ... The President said that line because it was based on information from the intelligence community, and the speech was vetted." On Sunday, Rice [repeated](#) on *Face the Nation* that "the clearance process should have picked up" the error and that Bush had to "depend on the intelligence agencies" to remove bogus lines from his speeches. On Monday, Bush repeated [three more times](#) that the CIA had "cleared" the speech.

2. It's the speechwriters' fault. The intelligence reports on which the claim was based were "given to the speech writers; they wrote it," Rice [pleaded](#) on *Fox News Sunday*. When asked on *Face the Nation* how the line got into Bush's speech, Rice described the process this way: "A text is created." Tenet agreed that the line "should never have been included in the text written for the President." True, every president relies on speechwriters. But if presidents get the credit for good lines (and, as in the case of "axis of evil," get irked when speechwriters take credit for them), they ought to take equal responsibility for the bad ones. If speechwriters were always at fault, no president who stuck to his script could ever be called a liar.

3. It's true that Britain said it. Rice went on three of the five Sunday talk shows to insist that the uranium line "was indeed accurate. [The British government did say that.](#)" On the other two shows, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld likewise argued that the line was "technically correct" and "technically accurate." When Bush ran for president, he derided Bill Clinton for failing to correct the statement by Clinton's lawyer, Bob Bennett, that "there is no sexual relationship" between Clinton and Monica Lewinsky. Evidently, that standard of responsibility has expired. Now it's OK not just to permit a fishy statement but to repeat it, as long as you attribute it to somebody else.

It's also now OK to hedge your language just enough to avoid clear falsehood. According to Tenet, CIA "officials who were reviewing the draft remarks on uranium [raised several concerns](#) about the fragmentary nature of the intelligence with National Security Council colleagues. Some of the language was changed." By all accounts, the change consisted of attributing the statement to Britain. On Sunday, Rice [assured CNN viewers](#) that "had there been a request to take that [line] out in its entirety, it would have been followed immediately." Since the CIA didn't demand removal of the line "in its entirety," the White House decided that tweaking the language was good enough.

4. It's part of a larger truth. On Wednesday, Bush was asked whether he still believed that Saddam had sought "to buy nuclear materials in Africa." Bush [reframed the question](#) in broader terms: "I am confident that Saddam Hussein had a weapons of mass destruction program." On Saturday, Fleischer [added](#): "A greater, more important truth is being lost in the flap over whether or not Iraq was seeking uranium from Africa. The greater truth is that nobody, but nobody, denies that Saddam Hussein was seeking nuclear weapons." Fleischer went on to emphasize the "larger truth" and the "bigger picture." Monday, Bush [again](#)

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[changed the subject](#) to this "larger point"—evidently forgetting that he and Fleischer took a slightly less generous view of larger truths back when the subject was Al Gore's role in creating the Internet.

5. It's time to move on. "The President has moved on. And I think, frankly, much of the country has moved on as well," Fleischer [told reporters](#) Saturday, without apparent irony.

Rice's comments raise several additional questions. In her briefing with Fleischer, she said twice that the CIA cleared the speech "in its entirety." But [according to Tenet](#), the CIA received only "portions" of the draft. On *Late Edition*, Rice [claimed](#) that "the Agency did not react to [the] statement" about uranium during the vetting. On *Face the Nation*, she [added](#), "Had there been even a peep that the agency [CIA] did not want that sentence in ... it would have been gone." Neither comment squares with Tenet's assertion that CIA officials who reviewed "the draft remarks on uranium raised several concerns about the fragmentary nature of the intelligence with [NSC] colleagues."

It's fitting that Fleischer asks us to move on from the uranium story as he prepares to move on to a new career in the private sector. We'd like to move on, too, Ari. It's just that when it comes to presidential responsibility, we seem to be moving in circles.

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William Saletan is **Slate's** chief political correspondent.
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Remarks from the Fray:

...It is clear that Iraq wanted nuclear weapons. Nobody disputes it. The question is what they were doing to get the materials and equipment, and fissionable elements. International intelligence services run on rumor. When they can, they confirm, or disprove, but until then they need to work with "I heard it through the grapevine." In fact, if they hear that Palestinians are making bombs... well, it hardly requires confirmation, because it makes sense, it's been done in the recent past, etc. So, to believe the italians, the british, that Saddam was seeking uranium... is a 'well duh!' type of observation. And its not like people can go back to the published and verified literature, and then plan experiments, etc. Military and diplomatic intelligence is too scarce for that. The question of who let that particular disproven intel into the speech... is maybe annoying but rather trivial. The liberal lefties and radical pacifists who have been targeting Bush from the time his campaign started are merely using it to get at him, while their various other attacks have failed. To turn it into some major scandal. In the sense that they have made the headlines (but, come on, getting the NYTimes to publish anti-Bush pieces, even if all the information is wrong, is unspeakably easy) they have succeeded, and Tenet has been proven ineffective. That is, he screwed up and his boss looks bad for it. But Bush is right to say he retains confidence in Tenet, and in fact, it's somewhat noble not to stick it to him too closely, for what is, policy wise, a relatively insignificant screw up.

--BenK

(To reply, [click here](#))

CIA Director Geroge Tenet's claim of responsibility for Bush's SOTU uranium claim is admirable, but it doesn't get Bush off the hook for including it by a long shot. (1) Colin Powell knew the CIA vetted the SOTU but pointedly refused to include the uranium claim in any speech he gave on Iraq. Why? Because the State Department also expressed serious doubts about the credibility of the uranium claim, going so far as to call it "highly dubious" three months before the SOTU. The State Department also vets the SOTU, so if Tenet is guilty of letting the info in, then so is Powell, UNLESS Powell expressed his doubts and Bush chose to ignore them. (2) NBC is reporting that Tenet himself specifically told Condi Rice's top deputy that Bush should remove the uranium claim from an October speech (three months before the SOTU). So while Tenet rightly deserves some responsibility for not axing the claim in the SOTU, Rice is equally guilty unless you'd believe that Rice's top deputy failed to tell her what Tenet said (which is absurd). Does anyone who knows anything about Condi Rice reasonably think she didn't know the uranium claim was highly questionable? (3) Bush's decision to ask the American people to rely on the intelligence of another country (the British government has learned...) to justify sending America to war is unprecedented and smacks of preemptive blame-shifting. After all, the US had the same intel as the Brits, so why the need for internal footnotes? Why not just say "We have learned that..."? Further, even if Bush believed the statement was accurate, Bush still had to decide that passing the intel buck to a foreign country was an appropriate thing to do. To borrow Tenet's phrase, relying on foreign intel is not the level of certainty which should be required for Presidential speeches. It bears noting that Powell refused to take this approach also. The bottom line here is that Tenet's falling on his sword doesn't begin to end the inquiry, and raises more questions than it answers. Bush still has a lot to answer for.

--Adam_Masin

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(7/15)