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Background Briefing on Iraq WMD

The James S. Brady Briefing Room

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SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Today I do want to walk through a document today that we have released, as well as take any other questions you have about the speech-making process here in the White House. I know that there's been a lot of questions about the developments of the State of the Union address; about what the President has been talking about; again what the President reiterated yesterday and has on many occasions about the clear and compelling case that he outlined not only before the United Nations Security Council, which resulted in the Security Council passing Resolution 1441, but also the information in the case that was provided to the United States Congress, which they used to cast their vote; as well as the information which the President shared to the American public, as well as the world in the State of the Union address.

What you have here today is the key judgments from the National Intelligence Estimate. The National Intelligence Estimate is the work product of about six intelligence agencies that pulled together all the information -- this is a particular one with regards to the weapons of mass destruction program of Saddam Hussein, as you see. It is titled "Iraq's Continuing Programs For Weapons of Mass Destruction." And in this document it is the key judgments they have made about the WMD program. Also included in that, in the back that I will talk about is the specific sections of the uranium acquisition.

The NIE, itself, is about a 90-page document based upon thousands and thousands of pages of intelligence from a wide spectrum of capabilities that our government has -- whether it be human intelligence, technical intelligence, foreign intelligence. All those different data points are crystallized -- not all can be included in one document -- but are crystallized in the National Intelligence Estimate, and then summarized in the key judgments.

And as you can see here, at the very first, as it says in the Intelligence Estimate, "We judge that Iraq has continued its weapons of mass destruction programs, in defiance of U.N. resolutions and restrictions. Baghdad has chemical and biological weapons, as well as missiles with ranges in excess of U.N. restrictions. If left unchecked, it probably will have a nuclear weapon during this decade." It also cites in there, "See INR alternative view at the end of the key judgments." Again, INR is one of six agencies that participate in this process. And the NIE process allows for footnotes and for dissents on any particular aspect if they so choose.

It goes on to say, "We judge that we are seeing only a portion of Iraq's WMD efforts, owing to

Baghdad's vigorous denial and deception efforts. Revelations after the Gulf War starkly demonstrate the extensive efforts undertaken by Iraq to deny information. We lack specific information on many key aspects of Iraq's said WMD programs."

This has been a key part of the concern the President has outlined on many occasions, that the denial and deception of the regime has always been a concern to our government, to many governments, because of lack of cooperation with inspectors, the throwing out of inspectors in 1998, and the thwarting of the job the inspectors had done, so eloquently presented by Secretary Powell. It has always been a concern of the United States government and other governments, as well.

As you go through these bullet points, you see if you go down toward the bottom part of page five, it says, "Although we assess that Saddam does not yet have nuclear weapons, or sufficient material to make any" -- it's really page one, but it's page five because that's what it was in the NIE -- I apologize -- "he remains intent on acquiring them. Most agencies assess that Baghdad started reconstituting its nuclear program about the time that UNSCOM inspectors departed, December 1998."

As we go through, at the top of the next page, this is a summary, not entirely inclusive because there's a 90-page report that follows this, but these are some of the key bullets that underline the reconstitution of the nuclear program.

"Most agencies believe that Saddam's personal interest in, and Iraq's aggressive attempts to obtain high-strength aluminum tubes for centrifuge rotors, as well as Iraq's attempts to acquire magnets, high-speed balancing machines and machine tools provide compelling evidence that Saddam is reconstituting a uranium enrichment effort for Baghdad's nuclear weapons program.

"The Department of Energy here agrees that the reconstitution of the nuclear program is underway, but assesses that the tubes probably are not part of the program," as we said and as Secretary Powell pointed out during his presentation to the U.N. Security Council. He said that there was a discussion about the aluminum tubes both with the IAEA, as well as within our own government -- both the INR, the State Department intelligence bureau, as well as the Department of Energy, both felt -- had different technical beliefs about the use of aluminum tubes. But the consensus, including the CIA, stated as it reads in this document.

"Iraq's efforts to reestablish and enhance its cadre of weapons personnel, as well as activities at several suspect nuclear sites further indicate that reconstitution is underway. All agencies agreed that about 25,000 centrifuges based on tubes of the size Iraq is trying to acquire would be capable of producing approximately two weapons worth of highly-enriched uranium per year."

And as President Bush said last night, as we stated many times before, the history on this is very important, that in 1991, after the Gulf War, IAEA and others had no conclusive evidence of a nuclear weapons program being as far along as they ultimately learned through defectors and through others that came forward in the wake of the Gulf War. That underestimation was only revealed through those efforts postwar. And that's a very important construct to remember, and it's a very important construct for policymakers to consider when they make judgments on policy.

And that's exactly -- this document, as well as reams of other information that may not be included in this document, but have been shared with the intelligence communities, with the intelligence committees in the Congress; many of this information is also in other forms, in various formats -- in the U.N. Security Council, in other foreign governments' own intelligence-based reporting. And that's why you've had a history of actions being taken by several of these bodies, whether it be the more than dozen resolutions passed by the U.N. Security Council demanding Saddam Hussein to come forward with his weapons program; whether it be the prior administration in 1998, and the subsequent vote in the 1998 Congress that resulted in air strikes being committed by that administration; or by the reams of information and the totality and compelling case that was provided before the United States Congress that they used in making their vote known and cast this past fall; and obviously, the information the President has shared with the public.

It is a clear, it is a compelling case that, as the President has stated time and time again, after the events of September 11th, that this war on terror will be aggressively pursued, that policymakers in this administration will not put the security of the American people at risk by putting our hopes and desires in the hands of dictators and madmen who have weapons of mass destruction and ties to terror. And that's why he has aggressively pursued this war, as eloquently put by Prime Minister Blair, as well as President Bush yesterday, both in Afghanistan, as well as in Iraq, and many other parts of the world as we fight al Qaeda.

And this information is a critical aspect of the decision-making process that policymakers have to make. These are analytical judgments made by analysts in various agencies. And policymakers take this information and then they have to make judgments based on policy. The President has been very forthright in that, in talking about the policy judgments our country is required to make in a post-9/11 world. And we will continue to pursue those policies to make America safer.

As you see in here, as I've said, stated, the footnotes have been provided by an alternative view -- and I'll read for you, state INR alternative view of Iraq's nuclear program. "The Assistant Secretary of State for INR believes that Saddam continues to want nuclear weapons and that available evidence indicates that Baghdad is pursuing at least a limited effort to maintain and acquire nuclear weapon-related capabilities.

The activities we have detected do not, however, add up to a compelling case that Iraq is currently pursuing what INR would consider to be an integrated and comprehensive approach to acquire nuclear weapons. Iraq may be doing so, but INR considers available evidence inadequate to support such a judgment. Lacking persuasive evidence that Baghdad has launched a coherent effort to reconstitute its nuclear weapons program, INR is unwilling to speculate that such an effort began soon after the departure of U.N. inspectors, or to project a time line for completion of activities it does not now see happening. And as a result, INR is unable to predict when Iraq could acquire a nuclear device or weapon."

And again, it goes into the much publicly known aluminum tube case. And as you can see below that, based on this information that they have, they make judgment levels, high confidence, moderate confidence, low confidence, as you talk about the various parts of the key judgments that are outlined before it. And I think it's important on the INR dissent -- like I said, it was one of six agencies, and based upon the history that we learned in 1991, policymakers have to take that in consideration when

they make judgments.

But I will cite -- I will go to the Cincinnati speech where the President addressed this very specific issue. In the Cincinnati speech that's been talked about, earlier in the fall when it was delivered, he said, "Many people have asked how close Saddam Hussein is to developing a nuclear weapon. Well, we don't know exactly. And that's the problem. Before the Gulf War, the best intelligence indicated that Iraq was eight to ten years away from developing a nuclear weapon. After the war, international inspectors learned that the regime has been much closer, the regime in Iraq would likely have possessed a nuclear weapon no later than 1993. The inspectors discovered that Iraq had an advanced nuclear weapons program, had a design for a workable nuclear weapon, and was pursuing several different methods of enriching uranium for a bomb."

He goes on to talk about some of the things that are in the NIE. He says, "The evidence indicates that Iraq is reconstituting its nuclear weapons program. Saddam Hussein has held numerous meetings with Iraqi nuclear scientists, a group he calls the "nuclear mujahideen," his nuclear holy warriors. Satellite photographs reveal that Iraq is rebuilding facilities at a site that had been part of its nuclear program in the past, and that it's attempted to purchase high-strength aluminum tubes and equipment needed for gas centrifuges, which are used to enrich uranium for nuclear weapons."

He goes on to say, "If the Iraqi regime is able to produce, buy or steal an amount of highly-enriched uranium a little larger than a single softball, it could have a nuclear weapon in less than a year. And if we allow that to happen, a terrible line would be crossed. Saddam would be in a position to blackmail anyone he opposes -- who opposes his aggression. He'd be in a position to dominate the Middle East. He'd be in a position to threaten America. And Saddam Hussein would be in a position to pass nuclear technology to terrorists."

That is, I think, as he said -- he goes on to say, "Some citizens wonder, after 11 years of living with this problem, why do we want to confront it now. And there's a reason. We've experienced the horrors of September the 11th. We have seen those that hate America, willing to crash airplanes into buildings full of innocent people. Our enemies would be no less willing; in fact, they would be eager to use a biological or chemical or nuclear weapon."

Back to the NIE. As we said, in addition to the key judgments that were provided, if you will flip to page 24, as stated at the bottom -- and again, this is an excerpt from a broader part of the body of the NIE. We felt this was important to provide as a --

Q We don't have page 24.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Oh, I'm sorry. If you'll go -- it looks like a blank paper, but there's a little box at the bottom that says "uranium acquisition." Now, this is taken from an excerpt of the overall highly classified nuclear chapter of the 90-page NIE. There is a process, obviously, to maintain the information that is classified. All this information has been provided to the United States Congress many, many months ago when this was produced. But there are many sources and methods and intelligence capabilities that are still very sensitive, and that's why the entire NIE could not be declassified.

But right here is a little bit of a history about the question of uranium acquisition. And as you can see, Iraq retains approximately two-and-a-half tons of 2.5 percent enriched uranium oxide, which the IAEA permits. This low-enrichment material could be used as feed material to produce enough HEU for about two nuclear weapons.

You can read on about this. There's a little more of the history. "Iraq has about 550 metric tons of yellow cake and low-enriched uranium at Tuwaitha, which is inspected annually by the IAEA. Iraq has also been vigorously trying to procure uranium ore and yellow cake. Acquiring either would shorten the time Baghdad needs to produce nuclear weapons.

"A foreign government source reported as early as 2001, Niger planned to send several tons of 'pure uranium,' probably yellow cake to Iraq." As of early 2001, Niger and Iraq reportedly were still working on arrangements for this deal, which could be for up to 500 tons of yellow cake. We do not know the status of this arrangement. Reports indicate Iraq also has sent uranium ore from Somalia, and possibly the Democratic Republic of the Congo. We cannot confirm whether Iraq succeeded in acquiring uranium ore and/or yellow cake from these sources. Reports suggest Iraq is shifting from domestic mining and milling of uranium to foreign acquisition.

"Iraq possesses significant phosphate deposits from which uranium had been chemically extracted before Operation Desert Storm. Intelligence information on whether nuclear related phosphate mining and/or processing has been reestablished is inconclusive, however."

What we also concluded -- what you see there, it says "Annex A." When I said the page that I just read from was page 25 of the NIE. This is page -- the Annex A is page 84 of the NIE. And it says, "Iraq's attempts to acquire aluminum tubes." This is where, in the Annex is where footnotes are provided. And this is where the State Department provided the aluminum explanation. But we thought it important to also include it here because, at the very end of that explanation it raises the Africa issue, as you can see in the very final sentence there before you.

So we felt that this information could help give context to the issue at hand. And what it also -- what I'd like to do is take a few moments to talk about the questions that have been coming regarding the speech, itself, and how the President has -- you heard him last night delivering -- about delivering the speech, and about the overall compelling and comprehensive case. But I want to walk you through a little more of the process in which the State of the Union is drafted.

To start off, I would say that speechwriters don't go off and just write a speech on their own. They gather facts. They base their speeches on facts; they gather that information in facts. And then they write drafts of the speech, and then the speech is shared with the appropriate personnel in the various divisions of the White House. If you're talking about education, obviously, the people who are in charge of education policy will look at the speech. If you look at the issue of Iraq, the people who deal with policy regarding specific elements of Iraq deal with that. Other members, both internally and externally, of the administration review the entire speech.

But what they do is they get -- they pull together information they have, and then they go and write the

drafts of the speech, and then those speeches -- they are not told -- they are given general strategic guidance of what we are trying to attempt in the speech. And you can read the speech and understand what our objectives were in that speech. It was very clear as the President delivered it, both on the domestic side and on the international side.

And then, as it goes through the process, it is -- through the drafting process, it's changed for stylistic reasons, for reasons of tone, for reasons of fact, for reasons of -- all kinds of different reasons. And that process is followed very carefully.

In this case, as the speech process went forward, one of the fact judgments -- or many of the fact judgments that the speechwriters used were based on the NIE. As you can see as you read the key judgments and as you read other documents or other speeches, that it's very similar or familiar case points that are made. And that information is shared with the speechwriters so they can do it. They are not told, this must go in, this must not, at the very early stage. They're just given a bunch of information; they go write the speech, and then the drafting process really begins then.

And in this case, on the issue at hand, the President's goal was to, obviously, demonstrate to the public and to educate the public -- or do the continuing education of the public about the comprehensive case against Saddam Hussein, the threat that he poses to the American people, to the region, the Middle East region and to the world, and the reasons why it was important that we enforce the demands of the United Nations Resolution 1441. And in so doing, the speech was drafted.

Now, I will say most of this, a lot of this will sound familiar, like I said about the specific points of the case. And what I want to do here is kind of walk you through a stylistic change that was made, in large part to make the speech more credible. And the way that happened was that in the middle of the drafting process, there was the construct of the speech.

And the construct went this way: We know that Saddam Hussein had materials sufficient to produce more than 38,000 liters of botulinum toxin. We know that Saddam Hussein had the materials to produce as much as 500 tons of sarin, mustard and VX nerve agent. We know that Saddam Hussein had about 30,000 munitions capable of delivering chemical agents. We know that Iraq in the late 1990s had several mobile biological weapon labs. We know that Saddam Hussein had an advanced nuclear weapons program, and had a design for a workable nuclear program and was pursuing at least five different methods of enriching uranium for a bomb. We also know that he has recently sought to buy uranium in Africa and has attempted to purchase high-strength aluminum tubes suitable for nuclear weapons production. Saddam Hussein has not credibly explained these activities. He clearly has much to hide.

So in those -- one, two -- six paragraphs, or sentences used, we made a lot of assertions. We said that we know these things. In going through the speech -- and this was the day before the speech -- we decided that it would be much more credible if we could explain to the public how we knew it -- not just assert it, but to fully disclose as much as possible how we knew this information.

So now you go to the speech as delivered, which I think is important to understand. In the way he delivered it that night, it says, "The United Nations concluded in 1999 that Saddam Hussein had

biological weapons sufficient to produce over 25,000 liters of anthrax, enough doses to kill several million people. The United Nations concluded that Saddam Hussein had materials sufficient to produce more than 38,000 liters of botulinum toxin. Out intelligence officials estimate that Saddam Hussein had the materials to produce as much 500 tons of sarin, mustard and VX nerve agents. U.S. intelligence indicates that Saddam Hussein had upwards of 30,000 munitions capable of delivering chemical agents. From three Iraqi defectors, we know that in Iraq in the late 1990s had several mobile biological weapons labs. The International Atomic Energy Agency confirmed in the '90s that Saddam Hussein had an advanced nuclear weapons development program, had a design for a nuclear weapon, was working on five different methods of enriching uranium for a bomb. The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa."

So what you see here in a little larger context, what happened here, as we went from one draft to the next, we thought it would be much more credible, much more explanatory to the American people to explain how we knew these things. So when we did that, when we came to the conclusion that would be a much more effective way and more credible way of informing the public about the case, we asked the speechwriters to go fill in the sources. And we did in each one of those cases.

And in the case on the subject at hand, as you can see here, you have the United Nations is cited. We prefer, obviously, public citations where we could. We cited the United Nations on several of those. We cited Iraqi defectors where we could. The International Atomic Energy Agency is one that we cited.

And in the case on the issue at hand, with uranium from Africa, the question was two pieces of information we had. We had the NIE, which I've just described to you and the document that that provides, which is a highly-classified document. Or we have the British document that was already made public.

Given the choice, based on the discussions of the speechwriters and the fact-checkers, we cited the British document. And that British document was inserted in the speech and then that information was then a part of a series of things -- it was not just this that had to be cleared by the CIA, it was all of these things that we were changing to verify from the CIA. And that's exactly what happened.

There's been a lot of reports about it. The person in charge of the WMD program is Bob Joseph. Bob Joseph is responsible for that section of fact-checking. He did what his job requires him to do on any speech, and that is to verify it with the CIA. That conversation took place. And they went through all the series of these -- this information, probably other information. I'm not here to say this is a conclusive conversation, but they did talk about these things, and it was cleared to use the British as a citation.

And that's -- it came back. There was never a follow-up discussion with the principals or with anybody or any flags raised about the underlying intelligence. That is how the process worked. That is how the information and how the speech was crafted. And as we've said all along, that information that we know today is different from information we knew then. And the process that was followed is outlined to you right there. I can assure you that every member of this administration who is involved with speechwriting is going to redouble their efforts to make sure that we give the best quality product to the President of the United States. He deserves nothing less.

And with that, I'm more than happy to take your questions.

Q Is there going to be a transcript of this? Where is the steno?

MR. McCORMACK: They're typing.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'll start right up here.

Q Is it not true that this information was included in a speech that he delivered in Cincinnati, and that George Tenet called Steve Hadley to personally ask him to take it out of the speech?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I appreciate that question.

Q -- it was taken out of the speech, and not delivered in Cincinnati, and then the same information, tweaked a little bit to include some British references, appeared in the State of the Union?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I appreciate the opportunity to address that question. As might have been cited in some newspapers today, there was not a draft of the State of the Union that included specific amounts, which is a critical distinction between this speech and the Cincinnati speech. Every -- there were three different lines that were changed. I told you the fundamental reason why it was changed. Very early in the draft, in the drafting process, when it was still with the speechwriters, it said, he has not explained his efforts to procure uranium in Africa or high-strength aluminum tubes suitable for uranium enrichment. That then changed to what I described earlier, "We also know that he has recently sought to procure uranium in Africa."

And that was just -- that's speechwriters writing a speech, they came up with a new construct to try to make the argument: we know, we know, we know, as I said. So that's why that change was made. And then it ultimately went -- as we said, we wanted to then go from, we know, to saying how we know. And that's how we went to the British government.

But what it said in Cincinnati was, over 500 tons of uranium, which is very specific to a specific intelligence report, foreign-based, single-sourced intelligence source. And that's why the CIA raised the question, that said, we don't want to cite specifics here because it's based on a single source. That's why that information was shared with the NSC, and was immediately removed. As we've said all along, any time that that happens, we follow their request.

And that's why -- it's a critical distinction between the two, because as you can see, there's a body of evidence -- and there's even more evidence with the British government, as the Prime Minister said yesterday -- there is a body of evidence talking about Africa. But there's a very specific instance with regards to Niger. And that's the difference that's been outlined for you. And that's why there was not the same type of concerns, in my opinion, that was raised here.

Q But if the information was so flawed that it was prudent to remove it from the Cincinnati speech --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I need to correct you there. I did not say at that time that it was flawed. That was later known by the forged document. It was a single source on a foreign government. And what Director Tenet has said is that in those instances he'd be more comfortable for the President not to cite a single source. It's not because it was flawed, and that's a critical difference. So the reason there was because it was a single source, not because it was flawed.

Q Wouldn't it have made sense, if Mr. Tenet felt that way about it when you included it in the State of the Union, to come back and say, Mr. Tenet, is this acceptable now in this form?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, there was a process that was followed.

Q He didn't see it, right?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: And that's what he's acknowledged.

Q Two questions. When was it clear that the Niger documents were forged?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, my understanding is that the documents were provided to the headquarters at CIA in February. That's when it was shared with the IAEA and that's when it was disclosed. When you read it publicly was the first time many people here in the White House were aware of the forged documents.

Q That was the first time many people here in the White House --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I can't speak for everybody on the White House complex, but if you're asking did people know about the forged documents before the State of the Union in the White House, the answer to the question is, no.

Q Second question. The information about Africa did not rise to the level of a key judgment, it is not listed as one. The NIE is not meant to come out of the President's mouth -- at best, key judgments are. So why was the information, if it did not rise to the level of a key judgment, why was the information put in the President's speech?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, you made an assertion inside your question, where you're saying that the President is not supposed to cite the NIE. There are ways in which the President can assert the NIE if it's cleared through the process.

Q But the other things the President asserts are key judgments. The Africa stuff, the uranium stuff did not rise to that level.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The NIE is a 90-page document. All those documents provide facts. The key judgments are not -- do not include everything in the 90 pages, or it wouldn't be key judgments, it would be the report, itself. And in this case, there were very specific data points provided in writing in the NIE that were included. That's why it was included in the speech by the speechwriters.

There was not anybody specifically saying, put this in there; it was included based on a body of information that was provided. And then is the fact-checking progress that clears whether information like that could be used or not.

There are many points, there are central points to the reconstitution of the nuclear program -- those are outlined in the key points. But that doesn't mean that other elements of the case of why they believe it was reconstituting were not accurate.

Q I don't think you've addressed the question -- let me try a different way. Name me another assertion the President made that failed to rise to the level of a key judgment.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I can't do that here today. I will be happy to look for that, but I'm not here -- I don't have the NIE and every speech the President has given memorized.

Q I'm just talking about in this specific case. In the case of the State of the Union address from the '02 NIE, can you show me another assertion the President made that didn't rise to the level of a key judgment?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm not capable of memorizing the whole NIE here today for you, Wendell. But I'm more than happy to look into that for you.

Q The administration has acknowledged a mistake was made. Can you tell me precisely what the mistake was? Was the mistake based on the facts of the judgment? Or was the mistake simply the fact that we included British intelligence in the State of the Union speech? What was the error that was made, so I'm clear?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think that -- what we've said, of course, if we had the benefit of hindsight and we know today what we knew then, it's a combination of the forged documents; it's an element of the

overall case on reconstitution. But, obviously, if you're writing a speech, at the juncture we were in when we were talking, why would you put something that was not core to your central argument if there was -- if you knew there was forged document and a critic could hold that up, you wouldn't put that in a speech. It wouldn't make sense to put that in a speech.

There's other information and there's -- obviously, as this has been reported and as Director Tenet has told in his statement, that they had concerns that were given to the British the year prior; that information was not shared with the White House. Those types of judgments that -- where the process where he said broke down, did not rise -- but the important part is that, you're right, the overall case is one that has yet to be determined. As Prime Minister Blair said last night, he's very convinced of his case.

But when you're talking about a presidential address and you're talking about -- knowing that there are going to be critics of what the President's policy decision will be, is that they would attempt to use any

discredited information to try to bring down the entire case -- of course, we would not put information in the President's speech that we knowingly knew that was suspect or that was deliberately forged. That just doesn't make sense from a standpoint of constructing the speech for the President.

Q The White House, itself, knew about some of those forged documents related to this case prior to the speech, didn't it?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, we did not.

Q Did not?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No.

Q The motive for laying off on the British intelligence, this claim that he was trying to get uranium in Africa, was, according to you, to provide a public source for that claim which you were trying to --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Where we could.

Q -- where you could. In doing so -- two things -- didn't you first lead the American public to believe that our government was certain of that claim? And you left out this rich disagreement -- "extremely dubious," the State Department says -- so that the President left out something that our government was still arguing about, and left the impression, by laying it off on the public source British intelligence, that the American government was foursquare behind that. Isn't that misleading people?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Not at all. Because as I've said, as I've stated here in the NIE that there was information that was similar to what the British government was reporting. The specific cases as outlined in the NIE reflect that three different countries in Africa, that he was seeking it. It did not say that a transaction had taken place, that it had been completed, but this information was this type of ingredients were being sought by the Iraqis.

And the British government is a very respected intelligence agency; that information they had, as I said, was public. We thought it was important that the public be able to, when possible, that we could share with them public documents that would illuminate the case and show why we made certain judgments. The U.N. was cited and various -- the IAEA, when possible, we could do that.

But the information, itself, if there were overall concerns about the general statement of seeking uranium in Africa, the fact-checkers and the way that process worked -- but we have to rely upon the documents we have at the time and the clearance process that was in place. And that's what we did.

Q But there were overall concerns about significant --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: To take that question, Terry, there are six -- the way the NIE works is that there are six agencies -- and there's a lot of other agencies that funnel through that, like, all the services have their agencies -- that work to put together this document. And in this they make a

conclusion. Yes, there is a footnote. I'm not sure -- if you use that as your test, as your standard, then any decision the President has made, he has to disclose every dissent: the President today put forward a \$20 billion tax cut. I'm here to tell you today that one of my advisors thought it should only be \$18 billion. That's not the way it works.

But the question of the matter is, the question of the matter is, as you go through this information and as you look at the overall underlying case about reconstituting nuclear program, the President made that judgment. The policymakers who have to look at this information made the judgment. We had misplaced predictions -- I almost said "misunderestimate" -- we underestimated the nuclear program in 1991. Policymakers have to look at information, particularly in a post-9/11 world, and make policy judgments. That's what the President did. That's what the President took, obviously, responsibility for last night. He makes the decisions based on when to commit troops. It's a clear and compelling case in what he based that upon.

And as you see in here, that many of the agencies in the analysis -- because the NIE, at the end of the day, they allow a footnote process, but they put in the document, in black and white, what the majority of the agencies believe.

Tamara -- everybody is going to get three questions?

Q Dealing with the tubes thing fits into this. His judgment, as the chief policymaker, based on his perception of the threat, in his State of the Union speech was to leave out for the American people the dissent on getting uranium from Africa and on the use of the aluminum tubes, and stand up there and present the most alarming case possible about Iraq's nuclear weapons program. Isn't that what he did?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: As you saw, Secretary Powell went into a lot of detail about the aluminum tubes in his presentation to the U.N. Security Council, which was pivotal to the vote that they may or may not have been casting. I think we were very forthright. The public dialogue that was taking place on the issue of aluminum tubes was very clear.

Q Am I right in sort of understanding that you all are saying that this uranium Africa statement or fact is not central to the reconstitution efforts? And then, if so, then did the speechwriters just get the whole NIE and say, pick what you want out of it? Or were they given specific building blocks or data points or talking points by the NSC or the CIA or State Department or somebody else, one of which was this Africa uranium point to include?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: They get their fact points from various -- from prior speeches, from public documents, from classified documents. It's a wide range of information. Again, this was one data point that was --

Q From who?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: From the NIE, as we said.

Q So it was just taken out of the NIE, it was not a particular person or a particular --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: It was based on the NIE.

Q So can you tell us who pulled it out of the NIE?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I cannot.

Q -- go back to the vetting process for a minute. First of all, was the conversation that Bob Joseph had with the CIA in that 24-hour window before the President delivered the speech the only consultation that took place between the White House and the CIA about this?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: About that section?

Q Yes.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: That's the only one I'm aware of.

Q And during those discussions was there any mention of the fact that the CIA the previous September had raised concerns with the British government about their including the Africa uranium thing in their public documents?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Not according to Bob Joseph.

Q Director Tenet, in his statement on Friday night, implied that -- or said pretty straightforwardly that some of the language was changed, was the phrase that he used, presumably in response to concerns raised by the CIA. Your account of this makes it seem that you had made the changes based on your desire to make the wording more credible and clear, and that, in fact, there was no change made in response to the concerns raised by the CIA.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Again, the decision was, in a series of assertions, we changed those assertions into citations of sources. And in so doing, there was a decision made. We had a choice between highly-classified material or the British document. The choice was made, the British document. And that was signed off on by the CIA.

Q But you made it prior to them -- in other words, you didn't do it because they asked you to.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm not aware of -- this is the way that we believe the process went forward, at least from how this language was changed internally here in the White House.

Q So there were no changes made after you spoke to the CIA?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Again, my understanding is that they cleared the British

language. What is not -- the perception is out there that there was a protracted negotiation, and that's just not the case.

Q Can I ask -- just for the record, can we ask about the protracted negotiation -- according to multiple sources, what Foley said in his testimony is, Joseph had provided him with an excerpt from a draft of the speech at which Foley detailed reports of Iraq receiving 500 tons of uranium from Niger. Foley said he called Joseph back, telling him the information was not solid enough and could jeopardize sources. Joseph then mentioned the sources, and said, the British had published an unclassified dossier and mentioned reports of Iraqi attempts to obtain uranium. And then Foley tried to discourage Joseph from referencing the report, because the CIA had suggested to the British earlier that it wasn't right to do that. And then they agreed that it would be technically accurate to cite the British reports.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: That was a citation of a classified briefing, given by interpretation of events by people who participated in that briefing. As we said last night, and we'll say today, that is not the recollection of the transpiring events, because I just read to you that every draft of the speech did not have the specific concerns.

Now, was the account that was being made there similar to the issue earlier about Cincinnati? Very close, because that was the talking about specific amounts that was used. I can say to you that in every draft of the speech that we reviewed and that was written, there was no specificity to the amount or the specific country.

Q The State of the Union speech?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Correct.

Q Can I just follow up on that, real quick? This obviously has raised all kinds of questions, particularly from Democrats, as we heard yesterday. And now Pat Roberts is saying that perhaps he wants to talk to some White House officials to set the record straight. Do you think that you're going to participate there?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, that's -- you're taking citations from the Washington Post --

Q Pat Roberts talked to our network, said he was --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: He did?

Q Yes.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, as we said all along -- the CIA Director spent four-and-a-half hours testifying before the Intelligence Committee. All the information, the NIE, all this information has been provided to the intelligence committees a long time ago. We will continue to work with committees, and make sure they understand what we understand. But as you know, and as everybody

in this room knows, going back to the Tom Ridge days of testimony by White House staff, that's something that we do not do. But we will continue to work with committees and make sure they have the information. I'm not going to, here, pose hypothetical questions about who would or who wouldn't. We will obviously work, as we have been, with the committees to attempt best we can to answer their questions.

Q One of the assertions that was made at the time and one of the reasons that you're coming under fire is because it was perceived that the President was making his best case for a war against Iraq by citing Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction. In his comments yesterday and in yours today, there seems to be much less emphasis on that and more on the global picture of ridding the world of someone who was dangerous in the wake of 9/11, who might conceivably do these things. Are you backing away from the WMD stance?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The title of the document I've just given you, Iraq's Continuing Programs for Weapons of Mass Destruction. As the President did last night and as we continue to do, there's a compelling, comprehensive case of the WMD program. And as the President said last night, time will prove that right.

Q Did you proceed with that, as Wolfowitz suggested in a print interview not too long ago, because it was the best argument you could make, the most effective in turning public opinion, even though there were other reasons to desire war with Iraq?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The President laid out the case which motivated his decisions, and that was a clear and compelling case that Saddam Hussein was a threat to the American people, a threat to the people in the region, a threat to his own people. And that's what he based his decision on.

Q Were you the senior staffer involved in the coordination for the preparation of the speech? In other words, were you in charge of the speech operation here?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The speech operation does fall under my purview.

Q And what role, if any, did Karen Hughes play in this? We know that she was involved --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: She plays an important role in speechwriting process. She continues to be, thankfully, an advisor to the President, and contributes on speeches and in other formats, and she contributed heavily to the State of the Union address. So she was very much involved, as well.

Q And who -- one more question. Who decided that you were going to attribute these various bullet points? Was that you or was that a collective staff decision?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, that's what I was saying. We don't make those decisions; that the speechwriters are given these facts -- we don't sit there and say, use this, don't use that.

Q You changed the wording from, we believe, to attribution. Who said, change it?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: That was a group discussion. I'm not going to go into naming specific people, but it was a group discussion.

Q Were you involved in that?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes.

Q When did the President read this NIE?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm sorry. The President has been briefed on more than -- countless conversations with his national -- with intelligence community about the contents of the NIE. I don't think he sat down over a long weekend and read every word of it. But he's familiar, intimately familiar with the case because he based his decisions on the case that is both included in this and information that probably was not included in this.

Q So this would have been read, presumably, by the National Security Advisor, and then she would have briefed the President on it?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Again, we have experts who work for the National Security Advisor who would know this information, who understand this information. He relies upon his administration, the CIA, themselves, as well, to give their best judgments. And that's what took place.

Q Can you square the one circle? Last week, the National Security Advisor told us that neither she, nor the President were aware of any concerns about the quality of the intelligence underlying this allegation. Given that it is a footnote, it's one of six opinions, but the fact that in this NIE there is expressed concern that this is of dubious quality, how is it possible that the National Security Advisor and the President would not have been aware of those reservations?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: They did not read footnotes in a 90-page document. I think that what's clear is that what the President and what policymakers are looking at is the case for reconstitution of the WMD program. In this case, the specific reconstitution of a nuclear program. The President was briefed on that on countless occasions about what he's attempting. He spoke directly to it, that we can't take the chance that he's not further along than we anticipated, much like it was a decade ago. The National Security Advisor has people that does that.

But again, it gets back to the crux. The NIE does have footnotes. But the NIE is still the standard in which is used to make judgments -- not the footnotes, but what there was a majority opinion on.

Q Was the White House aware of the Wilson report that basically debunked the -- was it Wilson?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Debunked what?

Q Yeah -- that came back and debunked -- a memo was supposed to be circulated to the White House and various other establishments in which he said that there was no evidence. I'm just trying to figure out how there could be so much doubt about this everywhere except the White House --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, it's important to understand exactly what you're referring to. This was not a memo from Wilson, it was an unidentified person in a summary cable, classified cable that went out to many people. And within that cable was a summary of a meeting that took place with a former Nigerian government official. This is all in George Tenet's statement, as well, much of it is. This was not aware -- my understanding was that this conversation was not informed of the highest levels of the CIA. It was not at the request of or in the knowledge of people here at the White House.

The information came back saying that a government official denied a transaction with Iraq. It's not too surprising that somebody might deny something like that. Secondly, in that document what it did say was that the person that we later learned out to be Ambassador Wilson said was that the person acknowledged that the meeting took place, and that he thought the meeting was about yellow cake, which confirms what is being said, which is "they're seeking." It didn't say there was a transaction. We never said there was a transaction. Said they were seeking it.

So if you get this one data point and you look at that, you can't draw a conclusion that we were warned by Ambassador Wilson that this was all dubious. It's just not accurate.

Q A couple technical questions. Can you just first run down the six agencies that make up this? Do you know offhand?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I will. CIA; DIA; INR, which is the State Department; the Department of Energy; the NSA; and NIMA -- National Imagery and Mapping.

Q Second point of clarification. Back to the October discussion over the specificity, where the CIA Director said to drop the reference because of the specificity. Why at that time was the whole reference scrubbed, instead of just the specificity? Why at that time -- I mean, did the Director at that time suggest -- was he focusing only on the specific 500 --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I can only speak to why he decided to move it out. There could be a whole reasons of words, of what we want to do, how much time and space -- there's a lot of variables in there I just can't answer why there was not a different variation provided there. He said this was too specific, and we removed it for that reason.

Q My final question has to do then with all of this stuff. I'm curious why this hasn't been validated, almost three months since the United States has been occupying Iraq, given the number of now senior former Iraqi officials we have in custody. Why hasn't -- all these are pretty big allegations we've heard before now seeing before us. Where's --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The President addressed that last night. There is a team that's led by David Kay that is doing a thorough investigation of the weapons program, Saddam

Hussein's. There are many people who do have to be interviewed. There are, as he described, over seven miles worth of documents that must be analyzed. And one thing we do know is that the regime was very sophisticated over a decade of defying the entire world and hiding from the entire world their weapons of mass destruction program. But that does not take away the fact that the President doesn't believe that it will be proved true in the days ahead.

Q In here, the British intelligence upon which the 16 words were based is just this one bullet point, or is there any other British intelligence -- where it says, the foreign government service reported -- is that the only --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, they had additional information.

Q They had additional --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes.

Q And Dr. Rice, also on Friday last week, suggested that, in a conversation about the 16 words, said that there were two accommodations made by the CIA, one about amount, and one about countries. Is that now not true? Or was she talking about Cincinnati --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think she was talking about Cincinnati. And I think Ari went back and --

Q -- talking about Cincinnati.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Ari went back and clarified that for the record later, that in her mind she was thinking Cincinnati. Because that is not the case for the State of the Union. I think they have clarified that record.

Q Does the U.S. have any idea of who forged these documents or what their motivation would be? What's the origin of these documents that we've been referring to?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I can't answer that question. I'd have to refer you to the Central Intelligence Agency. I don't know the answer to that question, of why they -- the motivations behind forgery.

Q Do we know who forged them? I mean, they must --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think that's being looked at right now, but I do not know the answer to that question.

Q Two questions, if I may. The first about, you keep calling this a footnote, by the way, and this paper does say "annex." This is an annex, right, where the INR alternate view is?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Right.

Q The words "highly dubious," that's the State Department's intelligence arm saying "highly dubious." Is the President comfortable about making assertions that the State Department thinks are highly dubious?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The President was comfortable at the time, based on the information that was provided in his speech. The President of the United States is not a fact-checker.

Q No, the State Department is saying "highly dubious." So he didn't know at that time when he was making the speech that the State Department thought it was highly dubious?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The NIE took that into consideration. The CIA processed -- the process that's followed by all six intelligence agencies, and they came to that conclusion.

Q Do you know --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I can't answer that question.

Q You don't know whether the President knew it was highly dubious, or you do?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I don't believe he would --

Q -- said, not at all. So this is the whole lead of this whole briefing, this "highly dubious." Let's be absolutely clear. Earlier I thought you were saying, no, we didn't know --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm sorry, there was somebody asking a question --

Q That's okay.

Q He followed up on my question.

Q The whole point of the whole briefing --

Q You're telling me you don't know if -- you can't tell us for certain whether the President knew that the words "highly dubious" is what the State Department was calling the 16 words he was about to say?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, he did not know that.

Q He didn't know there was any problem with it, right?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Right, of course. If it's in his speech -- obviously if he thinks in his speech and prepared for delivery, that it's all obviously credible to use. That's obvious.

Q The point is these words were here in the INR, which -- and certainly somebody here at the White House knew about what was in the INR, that's what you're working from. So why did the President tell us the doubts only surfaced after his speech? That was wrong, right? Or he misspoke?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, he didn't misspoke. The doubts about the underlying evidence -- but that was a conclusion made by the NIE. That's not to say that everything has to be unanimous in a decision-making process. You're saying that the only thing that could ever be cited is something that is unanimously concluded, and that's not the case.

Q I didn't say that, but --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: But that's what you're asserting.

Q Well, actually, the words "highly dubious" is a little different from, let's use 20 percent tax cut, or 18 percent. But what I'm getting at, when the President said doubts only happened after the speech, he was obviously contradicting what we have in front of us --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: He was specifically referring to the forged documents.

Q I believe the Italian government has confirmed, I believe, that they first received these documents and then passed them along. So just -- first question. Is the Foreign Government Service referred to in the NIE the British government or the Italian government?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm not in a position to be able to confirm what they underlined. I would have to refer --

Q In answer to one of the questions before, you spoke as though it were the British government.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, he asked me, did they have additional information that was provided in this body of text, and the answer to that question, in my belief, is, yes, they did. But I do not know if that's Italian --

Q -- whether this is the Italians or the --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I do not know -- I cannot confirm the Italian reference.

Q You cannot confirm or you don't know?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Don't know. I can't confirm something I don't know.

Q Secondly, does the President have any concerns about or asked for an explanation of why the U.S. intelligence community was not able to tell him or the White House that these documents were forged, and it wasn't until the IAEA --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, the White House is -- and the administration is getting to the bottom of that, of the documentation of the forged documents. And he will wait for the conclusions of those.

Q There's no dispute now that the documents were forged. It took the --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I have not asked him that specific question, so I don't know his thinking on that.

Q But has there been a request for an explanation from the CIA? How come you don't get -- you, the CIA, don't get the documents in headquarters until February, and how come you don't tell us before --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: And I think those answers are being found. I'm just saying that I don't know the President's thoughts on it.

Q I'm still confused about what the mistake was. Are you saying that the mistake was entirely in hindsight when you discovered later the forged documents, or are you saying that there was a mistake made in the process somewhere that allowed this information to be released?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, the Director of Intelligence has said that. And it's also that -- it's obviously also in hindsight, as well, what we know about the forged documents.

Q I know Tenet said it's his fault, but it's his fault for not catching a mistake that someone else made? Is it totally his fault, or is it the fault of someone here?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I think he was saying -- because his is the agency that verifies intelligence claims, and that's why he was --

Q -- but is he --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: But as I stated from the outset, every person involved in this process on the way forward is going to redouble their efforts to make sure something like this doesn't happen again. Of course, that's going to be the case. But this is not a point of trying to point fingers or blame. What we're trying to do is to get to the bottom of this issue, to provide as much information as we can. The CIA Director said, in this particular case, that if he would have known that this information was there and that there were the concerns that were shared with the British government and those things, that based on all that, he would have had the information pulled. Also in addition to that is the forged documents. Of course, if we knew what we knew today then --

Q But go back to the Cincinnati document, which you did see, and which you said was wrong, or enough in error that he thought it shouldn't --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Not an error. See, we just had the exact same conversation in

the beginning of this. It was not that it was in error.

Q But he was concerned enough about it --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Because it was a single source. He's saying the President shouldn't cite a single source. That's very different than saying that it was flawed. It's not as if he had the forged documents, going, this is based on forged documents, we can't use it.

Q He said that if he had had a chance to see what was in the State of the Union address, he would have said, don't say it, Mr. President.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Right. And I think that that was based upon --

Q So it's his fault for someone not showing it to him.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, he's saying, it's my fault because he heads the agency that had to verify it.

Q -- and accept some responsibility.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think we've said here all along that each person involved in this process is going to redouble their efforts to make sure this doesn't happen again.

Q Let me try again. What was the mistake that was made? If you go back to the day before the State of the Union and redo this, what would you have not done at that time?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Again, I think that Director Tenet has said that had he been more involved in the process, had these things -- that there were concerns raised directly from the CIA to the British government last fall about their concerns about the claim, if those things had been expressed that they had general concerns -- not just a specific concern about one report about Niger, but had general concerns about that,

which was in writing in the NIE, which leads reasonable people throughout the government to believe that this is the understanding of the government, of the intelligence community -- but what they're saying is, is that we should have been -- we should have disclosed more information about that, so that information didn't rise to the level of a presidential speech.

That's not to say that it's -- time might tell that that is absolutely true, as Prime Minister Blair said last night. But what is said, is that if there was this much consternation -- it was not shared with the appropriate people, but if there was this much disagreement about it, that needed to be, then in that case, obviously we wouldn't put it in the speech that the President was delivering.

Q Given what you just said, there are a lot of people on the Hill, Democrats and some Republicans, who say that the accounts that were given are a little different from what you're saying, and that things

were challenged, were pushed. Are you going to make people involved available to the Intelligence Committee as Chairman Roberts --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I've just explained to you the process that was followed. And we will work with the Intelligence Committee, as we have in the past and as we always do. And if Chairman Roberts continues to want to learn more information about this, we're happy to share with him. But we've made our position clear in the past about testimony, and we haven't changed our position in that regard.

Q Is the amount of disagreement and the weakness of the claim the reason it didn't rise to the level of a key judgment, if I can ask?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Hold on, Wendell.

Q Does sharing information mean that you will provide all the back-and-forth --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: You're asking a hypothetical. We're going to work with Chairman Roberts and the requests he's had. And we will work to try to accommodate him. I don't know what those requests are because he hasn't made him.

Q Isn't the amount of disagreement --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Hold on, Wendell.

Q Given what Tony Blair was saying last night, he's said on many occasions that he still believes that this information is genuine, has the White House, has the President thought of asking Blair or British intelligence what this information is and if, in fact, he could say, well, actually we didn't make a mistake, anyway?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, he respects the bilateral agreement that -- the bilateral agreements that the British government has and how they develop their intelligence. Obviously, they have their independent reporting on this. And as they said last night, he stands by that. The President, as we've said, we chose that for a State of the Union speech, because there was this information or things that have come to light, that we wouldn't use it. But, again, it doesn't take away from the fact that it may not be true. You don't always put everything that is true in a presidential speech. And looking back at that, obviously, that is what we said, that if we knew what we knew today, we wouldn't have done it.

Okay, Wendell.

Q I'm sorry, and I apologize --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: That's all right. I'm not going anywhere.

Q Isn't the reason this didn't rise to the level of a key judgment because there was so much disagreement --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I don't know.

Q -- and the sources were so weak?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I don't know the answer to that question. I didn't write the NIE judgment, nor was I involved in the process. What I do know is that it is in the NIE, based on the judgment of these agencies. There was a dissent. The dissent was provided. But the majority of the agency, that they said, we --

Q -- the President not made aware --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I've already answered that question, that's correct.

Q Does the President want all of the facts -- I mean, we're talking about a characterization of "highly dubious." Does the President want all of the facts when he's making these types of decisions? And again, this is important, because of the items in the speech that you articulated, you've got to remember, this debate over attacking Iraq went to imminence of the threat, and the allegation that Iraq was seeking uranium from Africa spoke more to the possible imminence than the other -- most of the other --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I don't --

Q The question is, does the President want all of the information when he makes decisions to go to war, or is he going to rely on summary documents and consensus documents?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I'm not a -- by far am I not a nuclear chemist, but my understanding is that yellow cake is at the front end of the process. It's not -- fissile material is the part that really gets you to that point, but yellow cake is very much in the first place. So I don't -- that was not, as I stated, in the President's speech in Cincinnati. And again, I think it's very important, because it does show that he says, well, we don't know exactly, and that's the problem about how close he is to having one. So I think he's been very forthright in that judgment.

Q When you talk about what the White House knew and what the CIA was responsible for knowing, you keep referring to the fact that this was a footnote, that the fact that the State Department thought that this information was highly dubious was a footnote on page 80, whatever --

Q Eighty-four.

Q Eighty-four, thank you -- that the President didn't read and Condi Rice didn't read. And yet the very first paragraph of the key judgments refers the reader to that alternative view.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: But mostly about -- if you read the alternative view, it's about aluminum tubes, and then it's literally the last sentence.

Q Wouldn't you think that if you were reading this document that that would make you curious enough to check it out? I just find it very hard to believe that nobody in the White House said, wow, there's an alternative view, maybe I should go read that and see what it says.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm not saying that nobody read the alternative view. I think the INR process has been very much talked about. But that doesn't take away from what the judgment, the general judgment by the IA -- I mean, about the NIE. You're right. As I said --

Q -- it's like, let's talk about why this is highly dubious, let's talk about whether this really belongs in a State of the Union, the most important speech a President gives.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, the process is one that these are facts that are given in the NIE, and it's the process that is relied upon to make sure that only facts and valid facts get into a speech. And we've all talked about wanting to redouble our efforts to make sure that process works better in the future.

Q Why isn't the President angrier? Why doesn't he seem more angry that this happened, that he said something that now the White House says he should not have said? Why shouldn't someone be held accountable?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, look, the President -- he had an explanation of what happened. He preferred that it not happen, like all of us. There are many people who wish this had not happened, no more than himself. But he accepts the explanation for how it happened. He knows that every member of his team is going to do their very best to make sure it doesn't happen again. Lashing out in anger right now doesn't change history, it doesn't change what he did. He's going to focus on the future. He knows they're not going to make these types of mistakes in the future.

And what's really critical is that as he looks at this, and he looks at this information, while preferred it not to happen, did it change his key judgment? Did it change his judgment on the case, not only broadly, but specifically on the nuclear reconstitution? And to this day, it has not.

Q In your characterization of the Cincinnati speech and the process by which that one line was removed, you quarreled with the use of the term, "flawed," and you said that Tenet's objection was that it was a specific, single source. But wasn't the real problem there that Tenet didn't believe that source was right and had already raised --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: That's not my understanding, that it was in citing a single source.

Q But if he thought that source was correct, why would there have been --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, because he said, for a presidential speech, we ought to be -- the standard ought to be higher than just relying upon one source. Oftentimes a lot of these things that are embodied in this document are based on multiple sources. And in this case, that was a single source being cited, and he felt that that was not appropriate. And that's --

Q So he never felt that the --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I can't speak -- that's my understanding of his explanation, that at that time, when it was shared on the Cincinnati speech, it's because it was a single source.

Q What I still don't understand, though, is that if the White House knew enough that it had to base this claim on British intelligence, why isn't it also partly the White House's culpability, because you must have -- even if you didn't know that a certain document was a forgery, and so forth, you must have known that there was some problem; otherwise we'd use good old USA intelligence.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Keith, I don't agree with your premise, because you say we had to rely upon the British government's report. I walked you through -- we walked through this. The reason --

Q You said, that's to make it credible. And you said, to make it credible --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: And we said, in the case -- when given a choice, if we can cite a public document, obviously we prefer to cite a public document, because people could then go analyze it. When you have a choice between a public document and a highly-classified document, every time I'm going to chose the public document.

Q On the question of the President -- he continues to say that Saddam was trying to reconstitute his nuclear program. If you throw out the uranium Africa link, if you throw out the aluminum tubes, what evidence is left, and why does he continue to voice that claim repeatedly?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: We haven't thrown out the aluminum tubes. And as they said here in the NIE, high-strength aluminum tubes for centrifuges, as well as Iraq's attempts to acquire magnets, high-speed balancing machines and machine tools are other parts of that aspect, as well as the part that he was meeting with and keeping alive his nuclear scientific team, recruiting new scientists, meeting with them regularly. There's pictures of him meeting with his nuclear mujahideen, as he called it. There's plenty of evidence there that led these agencies to believe that he was reconstituting his nuclear program.

Q Given the -- your regrets about the enriched uranium are not just because of forged documents or because there is a dispute within the government about the validity of the information, right?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I can refer to Director Tenet's statement, and that's what he suggests.

Q That's why it probably shouldn't have been in the speech. Why should the tubes be in there, given that there were two elements of our own government, plus the international agency, that said, this doesn't look like what the President said it is to us.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: It's in the key findings of the National Intelligence Estimate. And when you get all six agencies, you take dissent into consideration, you note their dissent, but there is a majority judgment that's made. It was made in this case, and that's why it was relied upon.

Q But going back to the vetting of the speech. When Mr. Joseph presented it to somebody who I guess we all know is Alan Foley at the CIA --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I don't know that.

Q Was -- well, Mr. X.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Or Mrs.

Q Did he present it and they said, fine, or was there any negotiation at all or any objection raised?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I have no information about the conversation between Mr. Wilson and the CIA. What I do know is that the only information that was passed on to other agencies, including the White House, was this summary cable, classified cable that was provided. And I can walk you through the details of it again, but it stated in that a former Nigerian government official denied that there was a transaction, but in that he confirmed that there was an actual meeting in which he believed the Iraqi delegation was wanting to increase commercial possibilities, and his interpretation of that meeting was that the seeking of yellow cake. That's all I know, but I do not know about the conversation between Ambassador Wilson --

Q -- Joseph and Mr. Foley and their recollection of a --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: What does that have to do with Wilson?

Q It doesn't have anything to do with --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Oh, I thought you said, Wilson, I'm sorry.

Q No, the question is, when the speech was presented by the NSC to the CIA, did the CIA simply say, fine, or was there some kind of discussion or negotiation --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I got to that earlier. I said, the recollection of Bob Joseph and others here is that there was not a protracted negotiation over language, where they were fighting over words, and saying, well, what about this, what about that. That just simply didn't happen.

Q I'm not asking that. I'm asking, was there any question raised or was it simply, it was --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: My understanding is that it was approved.

Q It was simply he gave it, they checked it off.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: My understanding was that the British government line was changed based on the chronology I gave you to that, because we wanted to cite a public source, and that his specific recollection was that that was then approved, that there was not a sharing of various language or anything like that.

Q So there was no -- I don't want to be painful about it, but it's important. There was no objection raised by the CIA about anything to do with that sentence?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: That's my understanding. Now, there was in Cincinnati, but not in the State of the Union process.

Q Just to follow on that. The earlier drafts, which you've quoted us, where the locution was, we know that, or, why hasn't he explained that -- were those run by the CIA?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I do not know the answer to that question. I'll have to find out for you.

Q So it's possible that the genesis for why --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, that is not the -- no, I told you the genesis of why it was changed. I told you the genesis.

Q And then, just on another subject. Just a week later, after the State of the Union, Colin Powell went before the U.N. and did not use the attempt to buy uranium in Africa. Is it fair to say that his vetting process was more thorough and he had a higher standard of credibility for the use of this intelligence in speaking to the world than the President did in speaking to the American people?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No.

Q Why not?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Because I think he -- obviously, it was his division that put the footnote in there, so it's -- INR is his division. I think that he would have persuasion over it.

Q Just to clarify the Joseph-perhaps Foley-perhaps not Foley conversation. They seem to have a very different recollection of that conversation than the one you just told us, including the draft language that they claim that they were presented is different than the draft language you just read us. Is that just a different recollection, and we have to leave it at that, or what is your explanation for that?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I can't explain what he was saying. I tried to give a theory from the sense that maybe he was confusing it with the Cincinnati -- I don't know, but --

Q Not only Dr. Rice confused with Cincinnati, but Alan Foley confused with the Cincinnati -- I mean, it's a pretty specific thing to recall what language you had.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: And I read specifically from the drafts of the State of the Union, so I can only go by fact. And the fact, in black and white in the State of the Union address and every formation I just gave to you. So that's the fact. And I can't deny that.

Q He says that he had a draft that included different language of the State of the Union. You're saying that that draft never existed.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: That's correct.

Two more questions.

Q Is it possible that he was talking to -- that Joseph was talking to Foley about the subject matter, but it hadn't actually made it into the draft, a draft that would actually be saved? Is that a possibility, that they were negotiating over this specific --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Not to his recollection at all, no.

Q Just to be clear. When the 16-word line first made it into the speech in the form that you said, "he has not explained," that was a speechwriter looking at the NIE and deciding that that was something he or she wanted to include?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: That's correct.

Q And you're saying no senior White House officials gave the speechwriters even any list, any idea of what they wanted to be included from the NIE?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: That's my understanding, that they were going through the -- all the information that was available to them. There was not a prioritization or anything like that. And that's how it originally appeared.

Q Was that an NSC speechwriter? Was that --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm not going to get into details of specific people, but that's the process that was followed.

Thank you everyone, appreciate it.

Q What did the CIA know that would have allowed them to say, don't --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm sorry, say that again.

Q If the CIA had actually read the final draft --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Right, which some did.

Q Yes, but apparently then the Director has fallen on his sword and --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The Director didn't.

Q -- and said, I didn't. If he had read it --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, he said he didn't.

Q -- what would he have known that would have caused him to say, better not use this?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm saying, he has explained it, that because of the concerns that they raised about -- to the British government as part of their claims is the reason why he wouldn't.

Q But why the hell didn't the rest of you know it then? You know, it begs --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Bill, the process was followed. And we rely upon that process. In the future, we're going to make sure that process is better, because every single person is going to redouble their efforts to make sure it's a good one.

Thanks, everyone.

END

2:24 P.M. EDT

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