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## Save Our Spooks

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**O**n Day 71 of the Hunt for Iraqi W.M.D., yesterday, once again nothing turned up.

Maybe we'll do better on Day 72. But we might have better luck searching for something just as alarming: the growing evidence that the administration grossly manipulated intelligence about those weapons of mass destruction in the runup to the Iraq war.

A column earlier this month on this issue drew a torrent of covert communications from indignant spooks who say that administration officials leaned on them to exaggerate the Iraqi threat and deceive the public.

"The American people were manipulated," bluntly declares one person from the Defense Intelligence Agency who says he was privy to all the intelligence there on Iraq. These people are coming forward because they are fiercely proud of the deepest ethic in the intelligence world — that such work should be nonpolitical — and are disgusted at efforts to turn them into propagandists.

"The Al Qaeda connection and nuclear weapons issue were the only two ways that you could link Iraq to an imminent security threat to the U.S.," notes Greg Thielmann, who retired in September after 25 years in the State Department, the last four in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research. "And the administration was grossly distorting the intelligence on both things."

The outrage among the intelligence professionals is so widespread that they have formed a group, Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity, that wrote to President Bush this month to protest what it called "a policy and intelligence fiasco of monumental proportions."

"While there have been occasions in the past when intelligence has been deliberately warped for political purposes," the letter said, "never before has such warping been used in such a systematic way to mislead our elected representatives into voting to authorize launching a war."

Ray McGovern, a retired C.I.A. analyst who briefed President Bush's father in the White House in the 1980's, said that people in the agency were now "totally demoralized." He says, and others back him up, that the Pentagon took dubious accounts from émigrés close to Ahmad Chalabi and gave these tales credibility they did not deserve.

Intelligence analysts often speak of "humint" for human intelligence (spies) and "sigint" for signals intelligence (wiretaps). They refer contemptuously to recent work as "rumint," or rumor intelligence.

"I've never heard this level of alarm before," said Larry Johnson, who used to work in the C.I.A. and State Department. "It is a misuse and abuse of intelligence. The president was being misled. He was ill served by the folks who are supposed to protect him on this. Whether this was witting or unwitting, I

don't know, but I'll give him the benefit of the doubt."

Some say that top Pentagon officials cast about for the most sensational nuggets about Iraq and used them to bludgeon Colin Powell and seduce President Bush. The director of central intelligence, George Tenet, has been generally liked and respected within the agency ranks, but in the last year, particularly in the intelligence directorate, people say that he has kowtowed to Donald Rumsfeld and compromised the integrity of his own organization.

"We never felt that there was any leadership in the C.I.A. to qualify or put into context the information available," one veteran said. "Rather there was a tendency to feed the most alarming tidbits to the president. Often it's the most ill-considered information that goes to the president.

"So instead of giving the president the most considered, carefully examined information available, basically you give him the garbage. And then in a few days when it's clear that maybe it wasn't right, well then, you feed him some more hot garbage."

The C.I.A. is now examining its own record, and that's welcome. But the atmosphere within the intelligence community is so poisonous, and the stakes are so high — for the credibility of America's word and the soundness of information on which we base American foreign policy — that an outside examination is essential.

Congress must provide greater oversight, and President Bush should invite Brent Scowcroft, the head of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board and a man trusted by all sides, to lead an inquiry and, in a public report, suggest steps to restore integrity to America's intelligence agencies.