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## White House Didn't Gain CIA Nod for Claim On Iraqi Strikes

Gist Was Hussein Could Launch in 45 Minutes

By Dana Milbank  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
Sunday, July 20, 2003; Page A01

The White House, in the run-up to war in Iraq, did not seek CIA approval before charging that Saddam Hussein could launch a biological or chemical attack within 45 minutes, administration officials now say.

The claim, which has since been discredited, was made twice by President Bush, in a September Rose Garden appearance after meeting with lawmakers and in a Saturday radio address the same week. Bush attributed the claim to the British government, but in a "Global Message" issued Sept. 26 and still on the White House Web site, the White House claimed, without attribution, that Iraq "could launch a biological or chemical attack 45 minutes after the order is given."

The 45-minute claim is at the center of a scandal in Britain that led to the apparent suicide on Friday of a British weapons scientist who had questioned the government's use of the allegation. The scientist, David Kelly, was being investigated by the British parliament as the suspected source of a BBC report that the 45-minute claim was added to Britain's public "dossier" on Iraq in September at the insistence of an aide to Prime Minister Tony Blair -- and against the wishes of British intelligence, which said the charge was from a single source and was considered unreliable.

The White House embraced the claim, from a British dossier on Iraq, at the same time it began to promote the dossier's disputed claim that Iraq sought uranium in Africa.

Bush administration officials last week said the CIA was not consulted about the claim. A senior White House official did not dispute that account, saying presidential remarks such as radio addresses are typically "circulated at the staff level" within the White House only.

Virtually all of the focus on whether Bush exaggerated intelligence about Iraq's weapons ambitions has been on the credibility of a claim he made in the Jan. 28 State of the Union address about efforts to buy uranium in Africa. But an examination of other presidential remarks, which received little if any scrutiny by intelligence agencies, indicates Bush made more broad accusations on other intelligence matters related to Iraq.

For example, the same Rose Garden speech and Sept. 28 radio address that mentioned the 45-minute accusation also included blunt assertions by Bush that "there are al Qaeda terrorists inside Iraq." This claim was highly disputed among intelligence experts; a group called Ansar al-Islam in Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq and Jordanian Abu Musab Zarqawi, who could have been in Iraq, were both believed to have al Qaeda contacts but were not themselves part of al Qaeda.

Bush was more qualified in his major Oct. 7 speech in Cincinnati, mentioning al Qaeda members who got training and medical treatment from Iraq. The State of the Union address was also more hedged about whether al Qaeda members were in Iraq, saying "Saddam Hussein aids and protects terrorists, including members of al Qaeda."

Bush did not mention Iraq in his radio address yesterday. Sen. Carl M. Levin (Mich.), delivering the Democratic radio address, suggested that the dispute over the uranium claim in the State of the Union "is about whether administration officials made a conscious and very troubling decision to create a false impression about the gravity and imminence of the threat that Iraq posed to America." Levin said there is evidence the uranium claim "was just one of many questionable statements and exaggerations by the intelligence community and administration officials in the buildup to the war."

The 45-minute accusation is particularly noteworthy because of the furor it has caused in Britain, where the charge originated. A parliamentary inquiry determined earlier this month that the claim "did not warrant the prominence given to it in the dossier, because it was based on intelligence from a single, uncorroborated source." The inquiry also concluded that "allegations of politically inspired meddling cannot credibly be established."

As it turns out, the 45-minute charge was not true; though forbidden weapons may yet be found in Iraq, an adviser to the Bush administration on arms issues said last week that such weapons were not ready to be used on short notice.

The 45-minute allegation did not appear in the major speeches Bush made about Iraq in Cincinnati in October or in his State of the Union address, both of which were made after consultation with the CIA. But the White House considered the 45-minute claim significant and drew attention to it the day the British dossier was released. Asked if there was a "smoking gun" in the British report, White House press secretary Ari Fleischer on Sept. 24 highlighted that charge and the charge that Iraq sought uranium in Africa.

"I think there was new information in there, particularly about the 45-minute threshold by which Saddam Hussein has got his biological and chemical weapons triggered to be launched," Fleischer said. "There was new information in there about Saddam Hussein's efforts to obtain uranium from African nations. That was new information."

The White House use of the 45-minute charge is another indication of its determination to build a case against Hussein even without the participation of U.S. intelligence services. The controversy over the administration's use of intelligence has largely focused on claims made about the Iraqi nuclear program, particularly attempts to buy uranium in Africa. But the accusation that Iraq could launch a chemical or biological attack on a moment's notice was significant because it added urgency to the administration's argument that Hussein had to be dealt with quickly.

Using the single-source British accusation appears to have violated the administration's own standard. In a briefing for reporters on Friday, a senior administration official, discussing the decision to remove from the Cincinnati speech an allegation that Iraq tried to buy uranium in Niger, said CIA Director George J. Tenet told the White House that "for a presidential speech, 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."

The British parliamentary inquiry reported this month that the claim came from one source, and "it appears that no evidence was found which corroborated the information supplied by the source, although it was consistent with a pattern of evidence of Iraq's military capability over time. Neither are we aware that there was any corroborating evidence from allies through the intelligence-sharing machinery. It is also significant that the US did not refer to the claim publicly." The report said the investigators "have not seen a satisfactory answer" to why the government gave the claim such visibility.

*Staff writer Walter Pincus contributed to this report.*

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