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Iraq Flap Shakes Rice's Image

Controversy Stirs Questions of Reports Unread, Statements Contradicted

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Just weeks ago, Condoleezza Rice, President Bush's national security adviser, made a trip to the Middle East that was widely seen as advancing the peace process. There was speculation that she would be a likely choice for secretary of state, and hopes among Republicans that she could become governor of California and even, someday, president.

But she has since become enmeshed in the controversy over the administration's use of intelligence about Iraq's weapons in the run-up to war. She has been made to appear out of the loop by colleagues' claims that she did not read or recall vital pieces of intelligence. And she has made statements about U.S. intelligence on Iraq that have been contradicted by facts that later emerged.

The remarks by Rice and her associates raise two uncomfortable possibilities for the national security adviser. Either she missed or overlooked numerous warnings from intelligence agencies seeking to put caveats on claims about Iraq's nuclear weapons program, or she made public claims that she knew to be false.

Most prominent is her claim that the White House had not heard about CIA doubts about an allegation that Iraq sought uranium in Africa before the charge landed in Bush's State of the Union address on Jan. 28; in fact, her National Security Council staff received two memos doubting the claim and a phone call from CIA Director George J. Tenet months before the speech. Various other of Rice's public characterizations of intelligence documents and agencies' positions have been similarly cast into doubt.

"If Condi didn't know the exact state of intel on Saddam's nuclear programs . . . she wasn't doing her job," said Brookings Institution foreign policy specialist Michael E. O'Hanlon. "This was foreign policy priority number one for the administration last summer, so the claim that someone else should have done her homework for her is unconvincing."

Rice declined to be interviewed for this article. NSC officials said each of Rice's public statements is accurate. "It was and is the judgment of the intelligence community that Saddam Hussein was attempting to reconstitute his nuclear weapons program," said Michael Anton, an NSC spokesman.

Still, a person close to Rice said that she has been dismayed by the effect on Bush. "She knows she did badly by him, and he knows that she knows it," this person said.

In the White House briefing room on July 18, a senior administration official, speaking to reporters on the condition of anonymity, said Rice did not read October's National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq, the definitive prewar assessment of Iraq's weapons programs by U.S. intelligence agencies. "We have experts who work for the national security adviser who would know this information," the official said when asked if Rice had read the NIE. Referring to an annex raising doubts about Iraq's nuclear program, the official said Bush and Rice "did not read footnotes in a 90-page document. . . . The national security adviser has people that do that." The annex was boxed and in regular type.

Four days later, Rice's deputy, Stephen J. Hadley, said in a second White House briefing that he did not mention doubts raised by the CIA about an African uranium claim Bush planned to make in an October speech (the accusation, cut from that speech, reemerged in Bush's State of the Union address). Hadley said he did not mention the objections to Rice because "there was no need." Hadley said he does not recall ever discussing the matter with Rice, suggesting she was not aware that the sentence had been removed.

Hadley said he could not recall discussing the CIA's concerns about the uranium claim, which was based largely on British intelligence. He said a second memo from the CIA protesting the claim was sent to Rice, but "I can't tell you she read it. I can't tell you she received it." Rice herself used the allegation in a January op-ed article.

One person who has worked with Rice describes as "inconceivable" the claims that she was not more actively involved. Indeed, subsequent to the July 18 briefing, another senior administration official said Rice had been briefed immediately on the NIE -- including the doubts about Iraq's nuclear program -- and had "skimmed" the document. The official said that within a couple of weeks, Rice "read it all."

Bush aides have made clear that Rice's stature is undiminished in the president's eyes. The fault is one of a process in which speech vetting was not systematic enough, they said. "You cannot have a clearance process that depends on the memory of people who are bombarded with as much information, as much paperwork, as many meetings, as many phone calls," one official said. "You have to make sure everybody, each time, actually reads the documents. And if it's a presidential speech, it has to be done at the highest levels."

Democrats, however, see a larger problem with Rice and her operation. "If the national security adviser didn't understand the repeated State Department and CIA warnings about the uranium allegation, that's a frightening level of incompetence," said Rep. Henry A. Waxman (Calif.), who as the ranking Democrat on the Government Reform Committee has led the charge on the intelligence issue. "It's even more serious if she knew and ignored the intelligence warnings and has deliberately misled our nation. . . . In any case it's hard to see why the president or the public will have confidence in her office."

Rice, a former Stanford University provost who developed a close bond with Bush during the campaign, was one of the most outspoken administration voices arguing that Saddam Hussein posed a nuclear danger to the world. As administration hard-liners worked to build support for war throughout the fall and winter, Rice often mentioned the fear that Hussein would develop a nuclear weapon, saying on CNN on Sept. 8: "We don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud."

Now that U.S. forces have not turned up evidence of an active nuclear program in Iraq, the White House is being barraged with allegations from abroad, and from Democrats on Capitol Hill and on the presidential trail, that Bush and his aides exaggerated their evidence. Rice, who is responsible for the White House's foreign policy apparatus, is the official responsible for how the president and his aides present intelligence to the public.

When the controversy intensified earlier this month with a White House admission of error, Rice was the first administration official to place responsibility on CIA Director Tenet for the inclusion in Bush's State of the Union address of the Africa uranium charge. The White House now concedes that pinning responsibility on Tenet was a costly mistake. CIA officials have since made clear to the White House and to Congress that intelligence agencies had repeatedly tried to wave the White House off the allegation.

The main issue is whether Rice knew that U.S. intelligence agencies had significant doubts about a claim made by British intelligence that Iraq was seeking uranium in Africa. "The intelligence community did not know at that time or at levels that got to us that this, that there was serious questions about this report," she said on ABC's "This Week" on June 8. A month later, on CBS's "Face the Nation," she stood by the claim. "What I knew at the time is that no one had told us that there were concerns about the British reporting. Apparently, there were. They were apparently communicated to the British."

As it turns out, the CIA did warn the British, but it also raised objections in the two memos sent to the White House and a phone call to Hadley. Hadley last Monday blamed himself for failing to remember these warnings and allowing the claim to be revived in the State of the Union address in January. Hadley said Rice, who was traveling, "wants it clearly understood that she feels a personal responsibility for not recognizing the potential problem presented by those 16 words."

In a broader matter, Rice claimed publicly that the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, or INR, did not take issue with other intelligence agencies' view that Iraq was rebuilding its nuclear program. "[W]hat INR did not take a footnote to is the consensus view that the Iraqis were actively trying to pursue a nuclear weapons program, reconstituting and so forth," she said on July 11, referring to the National Intelligence Estimate. Speaking broadly about the nuclear allegations in the NIE, she said: "Now, if there were doubts about the underlying intelligence to that NIE, those doubts were not communicated to the president, to the vice president, or to me."

In fact, the INR objected strongly. In a section referred to in the first paragraph of the NIE's key judgments, the INR said there was not "a compelling case" and said the government was "lacking persuasive evidence that Baghdad has launched a coherent effort to reconstitute its nuclear weapons program."

Some who have worked in top national security jobs in Republican and Democratic administrations support Rice aides' contention that the workload is overwhelming. "The amount of information that's trying to force itself in front of your attention is almost inhuman," one former official said. Another former NSC official said national security advisers often do not read all of the dozens of NIEs they get each year.

Still, these former officials said they would expect a national security adviser to give top priority to major presidential foreign policy speeches and an NIE about an enemy on the eve of a war. "It's implausible that the national security adviser would be too busy to pay attention to something that's going to come out of the president's mouth," said one. Another official called it highly unlikely that Rice did not read a memo addressed to her from the CIA. "I don't buy the bit that she didn't see it," said this person, who is generally sympathetic to Rice.

In Rice's July 11 briefing, on Air Force One between South Africa and Uganda, she said the CIA and the White House had "some discussion" on the Africa uranium sentence in Bush's State of the Union address. "Some specifics about amount and place were taken out," she said. Asked about how the language was changed, she replied: "I'm going to be very clear, all right? The president's speech -- that sentence was changed, right? And with the change in that sentence, the speech was cleared. Now, again, if the agency had wanted that sentence out, it would have gone. And the agency did not say that they wanted that speech out -- that sentence out of the speech. They cleared the speech. Now, the State of the Union is a big speech, a lot of things happen. I'm really not blaming anybody for what happened."

Three days later, then-White House press secretary Ari Fleischer said Rice told him she was not

referring to the State of the Union address, as she had indicated, but to Bush's October speech. That explanation, however, had a flaw: The sentence was removed from the October speech, not cleared.

In addition, testimony by a CIA official before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence two days after Fleischer's clarification was consistent with the first account Rice had given. The CIA official, Alan Foley, said he told a member of Rice's staff, Robert Joseph, that the CIA objected to mentioning a specific African country -- Niger -- and a specific amount of uranium in Bush's State of the Union address. Foley testified that he told Joseph of the CIA's problems with the British report and that Joseph proposed changing the claim to refer generally to uranium in Africa.

White House communications director Dan Bartlett last Monday called that a "conspiracy theory" and said Joseph did not recall being told of any concerns.

Staff writer Walter Pincus contributed to this report.

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