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U.S. Had Uranium Papers Earlier

Officials Say Forgeries on Iraqi Efforts Reached State Dept. Before Speech

By Walter Pincus and Dana Priest
Washington Post Staff Writers
Friday, July 18, 2003; Page A01

The State Department received copies of what would turn out to be forged documents suggesting that Iraq tried to purchase uranium oxide from Niger three months before the president's State of the Union address, administration officials said.

The documents, which officials said appeared to be of "dubious authenticity," were distributed to the CIA and other agencies within days. But the U.S. government waited four months to turn them over to United Nations weapons inspectors who had been demanding to see evidence of U.S. and British claims that Iraq's attempted purchase of uranium oxide violated U.N. resolutions and was among the reasons to go to war. State Department officials could not say yesterday why they did not turn over the documents when the inspectors asked for them in December.

The administration, facing increased criticism over the claims it made about Iraq's attempts to buy uranium, had said until now that it did not have the documents before the State of the Union speech.

Even before these documents arrived, both the State Department and the CIA had questions about the reliability of intelligence reports that Iraq was seeking uranium from Niger and other African countries.

Beginning in October, the CIA warned the administration not to use the Niger claim in public. CIA Director George J. Tenet personally persuaded deputy national security adviser Stephen Hadley to omit it from President Bush's Oct. 7 speech in Cincinnati about the threat posed by Saddam Hussein.

But on the eve of Bush's Jan. 28 State of the Union address, Robert Joseph, an assistant to the president in charge of nonproliferation at the National Security Council (NSC), initially asked the CIA if the allegation that Iraq sought to purchase 500 pounds of uranium from Niger could be included in the presidential speech.

Alan Foley, a senior CIA official, disclosed this detail when he accompanied Tenet in a closed-door hearing before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence on Wednesday.

Foley, director of the CIA's intelligence, nonproliferation and arms control center, told committee members that the controversial 16-word sentence was eventually suggested by Joseph in a telephone conversation just a day or two before the speech, according to congressional and administration sources who were present at the five-hour session.

At the hearing, Foley said he called Joseph to object to mentioning Niger and that a specific amount of uranium was being sought. Joseph agreed to eliminate those two elements but then proposed that the speech use more general language, citing British intelligence that said Iraq had recently been seeking uranium in Africa.

Foley said he told Joseph that the CIA had objected months earlier to the British including that in their published September dossier because of the weakness of the U.S. information. But Foley said the British

had gone ahead based on their own information.

When Foley first began answering questions on who from the White House staff sought to put the uranium charge in the State of the Union address, he did not mention Joseph's name, referring only to "a person" at the NSC. It was only after Sen. Richard J. Durbin (D-Ill.) and several other senators demanded the name that he identified him.

A senior administration official said yesterday the only conversation that took place was about the classification of the source of the alleged uranium transaction. The question was whether to attribute the alleged transaction to a classified U.S. intelligence estimate or to a published British dossier and, he said, it was "agreed to use the British."

However, there are six other references to information carried in the U.S. estimate, and they are attributed to "U.S. intelligence" or "intelligence sources."

Both the Senate committee and the White House have begun internal discussions over how to handle the potentially delicate task of questioning presidential aides as part of a congressional investigation. Claims of executive privilege have in the past increased public interest and complicated the process of calling on White House aides to testify.

Intelligence Committee Chairman Pat Roberts (R-Kan.) said Wednesday night: "We will take this where it leads us. We'll let the chips fall where they may." A senior congressional aide said Roberts is prepared to seek a way to question Joseph and any other White House aides.

Sen. John D. Rockefeller IV (W.Va.), the ranking Democrat on the panel, said yesterday: "The intelligence committee has crossed that line . . . and we are looking at people in the executive branch, including the White House." He said that both Republicans and Democrats are concerned "about the further implication beyond Tenet."

The FBI is also considering opening a counterintelligence case if it suspects a foreign government created the forgeries about the alleged Iraqi uranium purchase to influence U.S. foreign policy.

Next week, the Senate intelligence committee will hold a closed-door hearing to question the CIA's inspector general, who has been investigating the agency's handling of nuclear-related intelligence on Iraq.

The documents first came into the U.S. government's hands when a journalist turned them over to U.S. Embassy officials in Rome. Other officials said previously that the Italian intelligence services had given the documents to the British, which first mentioned the Niger-Iraq claim in its published case against Iraq in September.

"We acquired the documents in October of 2002, and they were shared widely within the U.S. government, with all the appropriate agencies in various ways," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said yesterday.

The embassy promptly informed the CIA station chief in Rome that it had the documents and, on Oct. 19, gave copies to intelligence officials.

A senior intelligence official said the agency did not consider the documents revelatory because they contained the same information, from other sources, already in intelligence reports. But in hindsight, the

official said, "we failed to see the signals" that would have indicated they were forged.

Another intelligence official said "the documents were such a minor point of analysis for anyone" because the information was not deemed reliable.

On Feb. 4, the U.N. inspectors' Iraq team was called to the U.S. mission in Vienna and verbally briefed on the contents of the documents. A day later, they received copies, according to officials familiar with the inspectors' work.

Using the Google Internet search engine, books on Niger and interviews with Iraqi and Nigerien officials, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) experts determined that the documents were fake.

On March 7, IAEA Director General Mohamed ElBaradei announced they were forged. It is not yet known who created the forgeries.

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