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Why Commander in Chief Is Losing the War of the 16 Words

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If President Bush's White House is known for anything, it is competence at delivering a disciplined message and deftness in dealing with bad news. That reputation has been badly damaged by the administration's clumsy efforts to explain how a statement based on disputed intelligence ended up in the president's State of the Union address.

How did the White House stumble so badly? There are a host of explanations, from White House officials, their allies outside the government and their opponents in the broader debate about whether the administration sought to manipulate evidence while building its case to go to war against Iraq.

But the dominant forces appear to have been the determination by White House officials to protect the president for using 16 questionable words about Iraq's attempts to buy uranium in Africa and a fierce effort by the Central Intelligence Agency to protect its reputation through bureaucratic infighting that has forced the president's advisers to repeatedly alter their initial version of events.

At several turns, when Bush might have taken responsibility for the language in his Jan. 28 address to the country, he and his top advisers resisted, claiming others -- particularly those in the intelligence community -- were responsible.

Asked again yesterday whether Bush should ultimately be held accountable for what he says, White House press secretary Scott McClellan told reporters, "Let's talk about what's most important. That's the war on terrorism, winning the war on terrorism. And the best way you do that is to go after the threats where they gather, not to let them come to our shore before it's too late."

White House finger-pointing in turn prompted the CIA's allies to fire back by offering evidence that ran counter to official White House explanations of events and by helping to reveal a chronology of events that forced the White House to change its story.

The latest turn came Tuesday, when deputy national security adviser Stephen J. Hadley and White House communications director Dan Bartlett revealed the existence of two previously unknown memos showing that Director of Central Intelligence George J. Tenet had repeatedly urged the administration last October to remove a similar claim that Iraq had tried to buy uranium in Africa.

White House officials and their Republican allies in Congress hope the Hadley-Bartlett briefing will help the administration turn a corner on the controversy, and they plan a counteroffensive to try to put Bush's critics on the defensive. But the administration faces new risks as Congress begins its own investigations, which could bring the bureaucratic infighting into open conflict.

The White House and the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence are trying to work out ground rules for the collection of information from National Security Council personnel involved in preparing the president's State of the Union address, according to administration and congressional sources.

"A list has gone to the White House and documents have been requested," according to one

congressional aide. On that document list are the two memos cited by Hadley and Bartlett from the CIA, dated Oct. 5 and Oct. 6, which contained comments on specific sections of drafts of the president's Oct. 7 speech on the dangers posed by Saddam Hussein.

Tenet testified yesterday in closed session of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, and today the CIA inspector general, John L. Helgerson, is scheduled to appear before the Senate intelligence panel to discuss the findings of his ongoing investigation of how the speech was vetted. Tenet was questioned about the State of the Union speech and about the intelligence developed around Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.

Beyond the memos, one area of potential risk for the administration is an October telephone call from Tenet to Hadley to make certain the offending language had been removed from Bush's Oct. 7 speech. Hadley said he cannot recall whether that issue was discussed with Tenet on Oct. 5, Oct. 6 or Oct. 7, but a senior administration official familiar with the events said it was "most likely" on Oct. 7, the day of Bush's speech. Going to Hadley directly indicated Tenet's fear that his underlings had not been successful.

Another potential problem for the White House is the sharp disagreement between testimony given the committee last Thursday by CIA senior analyst Alan Foley about his conversation with Robert Joseph, a National Security Council staff member, about what was to go into the State of the Union address and how Bartlett described it to reporters Tuesday.

For all the purported discipline and unity within the Bush administration, disputes among members of the national security team have been common, particularly in the run-up to the war with Iraq. Those disputes, however, generally pitted the State and Defense departments against one another, but once Bush made a decision, the combatants generally accepted that and moved on.

What is unusual about this episode is that the combatants are officials at the White House and the CIA -- and that the White House has tried without success to resolve the controversy. The biggest lesson learned so far, said one administration official, is that "you don't pick a bureaucratic fight with the CIA." To which a White House official replied, "That wasn't our intention, but that certainly has been the perception."

White House allies outside the government have expressed surprise at the administration's repeated missteps over the past two weeks, using phrases such as "stumbled," "caught flat-footed" and "can't get their story straight." Said one senior administration official, "These stories get legs when they're mishandled and this story has been badly mishandled."

Joe Lockhart, who was press secretary to President Bill Clinton, said he has been equally surprised by the way this White House has dealt with the controversy. "Their every move has resulted in people being more interested in the story rather than less interested," he said.

Mary Matalin, a former Bush White House adviser, said, "It's impossible to have a consistent message when the facts keep changing. We forsook consistency for honesty, in an effort to be as forthcoming as possible in putting out new facts as they became available."

A senior White House official said there are mitigating circumstances, beginning with the fact that the president was traveling in Africa when the controversy took root, while Tenet was also traveling. The unstable environment in postwar Iraq and the fact that no weapons of mass destruction have been found provided a foundation for more questions over Bush's State of the Union claims. "And you learn it's

difficult to control unnamed sources on both sides, including in the White House," he added.

There are plenty of what-ifs about this dispute, the biggest being, what if Bush, while traveling in Africa, had simply taken responsibility for using a disputed claim in his speech, called it a mistake and argued that there was plenty of other evidence to support his determination to remove Hussein from power. Administration officials say that would not have changed things. "[The press] would have asked, how did it get in there," said a White House official involved in the dispute. "This was a process story and [having Bush take responsibility] didn't answer the process questions."

The first crack in the administration came on July 7, the morning Bush was leaving for Africa, when then-White House press secretary Ari Fleischer told reporters it was wrong to have used the statement in the speech because the administration had learned after the speech was delivered that the claim was based on forged intelligence documents.

Fleischer's statement triggered a barrage of questions that followed the presidential entourage through Africa, and his explanation of what had happened was quickly overtaken by new statements coming from the administration.

While in Africa, Bush and national security adviser Condoleezza Rice publicly pinned the blame on the CIA, a decision that in retrospect was clearly a mistake. Tenet, who had spoken to Rice that morning, issued a planned statement in which he took responsibility.

His statement was wrongly interpreted as his acceptance of sole responsibility. But a careful reading of the three-page statement showed that he only took responsibility for his agency's failure to be more diligent in making sure the language was kept out of the president's speech, and he pointed to National Security Council officials who wanted to keep the language despite the agency's protests.

By the time Bush returned from Africa, a new controversy had erupted after revelations that the White House and the CIA had battled last fall over removing similar language from the Oct. 7 speech.

When the White House attempted last Friday to portray Tenet's intervention in that episode as solely a technical matter involving intelligence sourcing, the CIA responded by letting it be known that Tenet had objected to exactly the same language that was in the State of the Union address.

The fact that it was backed up by memos forced the White House to go through the embarrassment of having Hadley publicly acknowledge he was at fault for not remembering in January that the White House had removed the same language just three months earlier.

Staff writer Mike Allen contributed

to this report.

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