

Doubts stripped from public version of Iraq assessment

A declassified document shows the government took out dissenting opinions before releasing information

By Jonathan S. Landay
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

WASHINGTON — The public version of the U.S. intelligence community's key prewar assessment of Iraq's illicit arms programs was stripped of dissenting opinions, warnings of insufficient information and doubts about deposed dictator Saddam Hussein's intentions, a review of the document and its once-classified version shows.

As a result, the public was given a far more definitive assessment of Iraq's plans and capabilities than President Bush and other U.S. decision-makers received from their intelligence agencies.

The stark differences between the public version and the then top-secret version of the October 2002 National Intelligence Estimate raise new questions about the accuracy of the public case made for a war that's claimed the

lives of more than 500 U.S. service members and thousands of Iraqis.

The two documents are replete with differences. For example, the public version declared that "most analysts assess Iraq is reconstituting its nuclear weapons program" and says "if left unchecked, it probably will have a nuclear weapon within this decade."

But it fails to mention the dissenting view offered in the top-secret version by the State Department's intelligence arm, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, known as the INR.

That view said, in part, "The activities we have detected do not, however, add up to a compelling case that Iraq is currently pursuing what INR would consider to be an integrated and comprehensive approach to acquire nuclear weapons. Iraq may be doing so, but INR considers the available evidence inadequate to support such a judgment."

The alternative view further said "INR is unwilling to ... project a timeline for the completion of activities it does not now see happening."

Both versions were written by the National Intelligence Council, a board of senior analysts who report to

CIA Director George Tenet and prepare reports on crucial national security issues. Stuart Cohen, a 30-year CIA veteran, was the NIC's acting chairman at the time.

The CIA didn't respond officially to requests to explain the differences in the two versions. But a senior intelligence official, speaking on condition of anonymity, explained them by saying a more candid public version could have revealed U.S. intelligence-gathering methods.

Last week, Tenet defended the intelligence community's reporting on Iraq, telling an audience at Georgetown University that differences over Iraq's capabilities "were spelled out" in the October 2002 intelligence estimate.

But while top U.S. officials may have been told of differences among analysts, those disputes were kept from the American public in key areas, including whether Saddam was stockpiling biological and chemical weapons and whether he might dispatch poison-spraying robot aircraft to attack the United States.

Both documents have been available to the public for months. The CIA released the public version, titled "Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction

Programs," in October 2002, when the Bush administration was making its case for war. The White House declassified and released portions of the NIE's key findings in July 2003.

Knight Ridder compared the documents in light of Tenet's speech and continuing controversy over the intelligence that President Bush used to justify the invasion last April. There are currently seven separate official inquiries into the issue.

What that comparison showed is that while the top-secret version delivered to Bush, his top lieutenants and Congress was heavily qualified with caveats about some of its most important conclusions about Iraq's illicit weapons programs, those caveats were omitted from the public version.

The caveats included the phrases "we judge that," "we assess that" and "we lack specific information on many key aspects of Iraq's WMD programs."

These phrases, according to current and former intelligence officials, long have been used in intelligence reports to stress an absence of hard information and underscore that judgments are extrapolations or estimates.

Among the most striking differences between the versions were those

over Iraq's development of small, unmanned aircraft, also known as unmanned aerial vehicles.

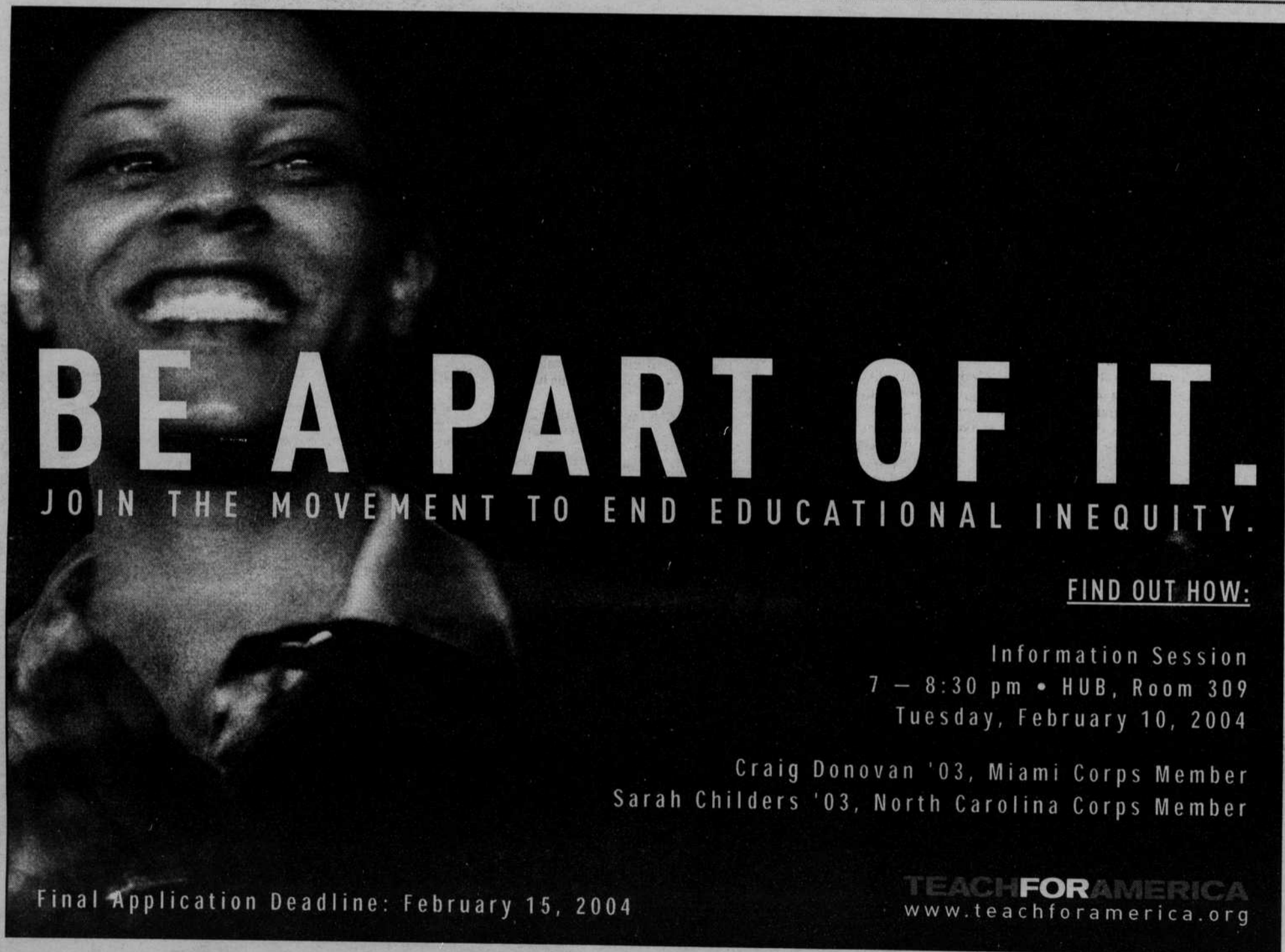
The public version said Iraq's UAVs "especially if used for delivery of chemical and biological warfare (CBW) agents — could threaten Iraq's neighbors, US forces in the Persian Gulf, and the United States if brought close to, or into, the US Homeland."

The classified version showed there was major disagreement on the issue from the agency with the greatest expertise on such aircraft, the Air Force. The Air Force "does not agree that Iraq is developing UAVs primarily intended to be delivery platforms for chemical and biological warfare (CBW) agents," it said. "The small size of Iraq's new UAV strongly suggests a primary role of reconnaissance, although CBW delivery is an inherent capability."

Deleted from the public version was a line in the classified report that cast doubt on whether Saddam was prepared to support terrorist attacks on the United States, a danger that Bush and his top aides raised repeatedly in making their case for war.

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