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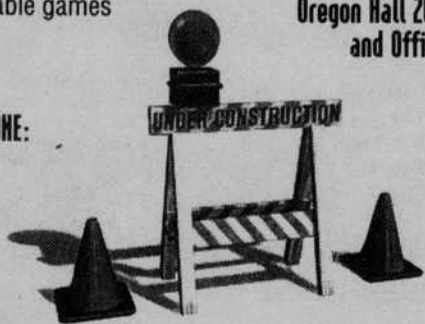
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# CIA director fights Cheney assertions

George Tenet said recent claims by Vice President Dick Cheney that Iraq had ties with al-Qaida are false

By Jonathan S. Landay  
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

WASHINGTON — CIA Director George Tenet on Tuesday rejected recent assertions by Vice President Dick Cheney that Iraq cooperated with the al-Qaida terrorist network and that the administration had proof of an illicit Iraqi biological warfare program.

Tenet's comments to the Senate Armed Services Committee are likely to fuel friction between the White House and intelligence agencies over the failure so far to find any of the banned weapons stockpiles that President Bush, in justifying his case for war, charged Saddam Hussein with concealing.

Tenet at first appeared to defend the administration, saying he didn't believe the White House misrepresented intelligence provided by the CIA.

The administration's statements, he said, reflected a prewar intelligence consensus that Saddam had stockpiled chemical and biological weapons and was pursuing nuclear bombs.

But under sharp questioning by Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., Tenet reversed himself, saying there had been instances when he had warned administration officials they were misstating the threat posed by Iraq.

"I'm not going to sit here and tell you what my interaction was ... and what I did and didn't do, except that you have to have confidence to know that when I believed that somebody was misconstruing intelligence, I said something about it," Tenet said. "I don't stand up publicly and do it."

Tenet admitted to Sen. Carl Levin of Michigan, the committee's senior Democrat, that he had told Cheney the vice president was wrong in saying two truck trailers recovered in Iraq were "conclusive evidence" Saddam had a biological weapons program.

Cheney made the assertion in a Jan. 22 interview with National Public Radio.

Tenet said U.S. intelligence agencies still disagree on the purpose of the trailers. Some analysts believe they were mobile biological-weapons facilities; others think they may have been for making hydrogen gas for weather balloons.

Levin also questioned Tenet about a Jan. 9 interview with the Rocky Mountain News, in which Cheney cited a November article in the Weekly Standard, a conservative magazine, as "the best source of information" on cooperation between Saddam and al-Qaida.

The article was based on a leaked top-secret memorandum. It purportedly set out evidence, compiled by a special Pentagon intelligence cell, that Saddam was in league with al-Qaida

leader Osama bin Laden. It was written by Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith, the third-highest Pentagon official and a key proponent of the war.

"Did the CIA agree with the contents of the Feith document?" asked Levin.

"Senator, we did not clear the document," Tenet replied. "We did not agree with the way the data was characterized in that document."

Tenet, who pointed out the Pentagon, too, had disavowed the document, said he learned of the article Monday night, and he planned to speak with Cheney about the CIA's view of the Feith document.

In building the case for war, Bush, Cheney and other top officials relied in part on assessments by the CIA and other agencies. But they concealed disputes and dissents over Iraq's weapons programs and links to terrorists that were raging among analysts, U.S. diplomats and military officials.

They also used exaggerated and fabricated information from defectors and former Iraqi exile groups that was fed directly into Cheney's office and the Pentagon. Those groups included the Iraqi National Congress, whose leader, Ahmad Chalabi, was close to hawks around Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld and the White House, but who was distrusted by the CIA and the State Department.

Adm. Lowell Jacoby, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, the military's main intelligence arm, said "some" information provided by defectors had checked out, but they also gave material that was "fabricated or embellished."

Bush has appointed a bipartisan commission to investigate what the CIA and other intelligence agencies knew about prewar Iraq, but wouldn't permit the commission to examine how intelligence was used by the White House and the Pentagon. Information from Iraqi defectors and exile groups, who contended Saddam was a great threat, also was ruled off-limits.

Politics pervaded Tuesday's hearing. Democrats sought to prove Bush and his top aides overstated prewar intelligence assessments of the threat posed by Saddam. Republicans insisted the administration's arguments reflected the CIA's judgment, the views of most lawmakers and those of the former Clinton administration.

"Members of this committee, members of the Senate, as well as past and present administrations reached the same conclusions: Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction," said Sen. John Warner, R-Va., the panel chairman.

Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., the Democratic presidential candidate, and other critics are linking the issue to Bush's credibility as the election campaign heats up and the toll of dead and injured U.S. soldiers rises.

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