

The New York Times
nytimes.com

July 6, 2003

What I Didn't Find in Africa

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**GOVERNMENT
EXHIBIT**

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WASHINGTON

Did the Bush administration manipulate intelligence about Saddam Hussein's weapons programs to justify an invasion of Iraq?

Based on my experience with the administration in the months leading up to the war, I have little choice but to conclude that some of the intelligence related to Iraq's nuclear weapons program was twisted to exaggerate the Iraqi threat.

For 23 years, from 1976 to 1998, I was a career foreign service officer and ambassador. In 1990, as chargé d'affaires in Baghdad, I was the last American diplomat to meet with Saddam Hussein. (I was also a forceful advocate for his removal from Kuwait.) After Iraq, I was President George H. W. Bush's ambassador to Gabon and São Tomé and Príncipe; under President Bill Clinton, I helped direct Africa policy for the National Security Council.

It was my experience in Africa that led me to play a small role in the effort to verify information about Africa's suspected link to Iraq's nonconventional weapons programs. Those news stories about that unnamed former envoy who went to Niger? That's me.

In February 2002, I was informed by officials at the Central Intelligence Agency that Vice President Dick Cheney's office had questions about a particular intelligence report. While I never saw the report, I was told that it referred to a memorandum of agreement that documented the sale of uranium yellowcake — a form of lightly processed ore — by Niger to Iraq in the late 1990's. The agency officials asked if I would travel to Niger to check out the story so they could provide a response to the vice president's office.

After consulting with the State Department's African Affairs Bureau (and through it with Barbro Owens-Kirkpatrick, the United States ambassador to Niger), I agreed to make the trip. The mission I undertook was discreet but by no means secret. While the C.I.A. paid my expenses (my time was offered pro bono), I made it abundantly clear to everyone I met that I was acting on behalf of the United States government.

In late February 2002, I arrived in Niger's capital, Niamey, where I had been a diplomat in the mid-70's and visited as a National Security Council official in the late 90's. The city was much as I remembered it. Seasonal winds had clogged the air with dust and sand. Through the haze, I could see camel caravans crossing the Niger River (over the John F. Kennedy bridge), the setting sun behind them. Most people had wrapped scarves around their faces to protect against the grit, leaving only their eyes visible.

The next morning, I met with Ambassador Owens-Kirkpatrick at the embassy. For reasons that are

understandable, the embassy staff has always kept a close eye on Niger's uranium business. I was not surprised, then, when the ambassador told me that she knew about the allegations of uranium sales to Iraq — and that she felt she had already debunked them in her reports to Washington. Nevertheless, she and I agreed that my time would be best spent interviewing people who had been in government when the deal supposedly took place, which was before her arrival.

I spent the next eight days drinking sweet mint tea and meeting with dozens of people: current government officials, former government officials, people associated with the country's uranium business. It did not take long to conclude that it was highly doubtful that any such transaction had ever taken place.

Given the structure of the consortiums that operated the mines, it would be exceedingly difficult for Niger to transfer uranium to Iraq. Niger's uranium business consists of two mines, Somair and Cominak, which are run by French, Spanish, Japanese, German and Nigerian interests. If the government wanted to remove uranium from a mine, it would have to notify the consortium, which in turn is strictly monitored by the International Atomic Energy Agency. Moreover, because the two mines are closely regulated, quasi-governmental entities, selling uranium would require the approval of the minister of mines, the prime minister and probably the president. In short, there's simply too much oversight over too small an industry for a sale to have transpired.

(As for the actual memorandum, I never saw it. But news accounts have pointed out that the documents had glaring errors — they were signed, for example, by officials who were no longer in government — and were probably forged. And then there's the fact that Niger formally denied the charges.)

Before I left Niger, I briefed the ambassador on my findings, which were consistent with her own. I also shared my conclusions with members of her staff. In early March, I arrived in Washington and promptly provided a detailed briefing to the C.I.A. I later shared my conclusions with the State Department African Affairs Bureau. There was nothing secret or earth-shattering in my report, just as there was nothing secret about my trip.

Though I did not file a written report, there should be at least four documents in United States government archives confirming my mission. The documents should include the ambassador's report of my debriefing in Niamey, a separate report written by the embassy staff, a C.I.A. report summing up my trip, and a specific answer from the agency to the office of the vice president (this may have been delivered orally). While I have not seen any of these reports, I have spent enough time in government to know that this is standard operating procedure.

I thought the Niger matter was settled and went back to my life. (I did take part in the Iraq debate, arguing that a strict containment regime backed by the threat of force was preferable to an invasion.) In September 2002, however, Niger re-emerged. The British government published a "white paper" asserting that Saddam Hussein and his unconventional arms posed an immediate danger. As evidence, the report cited Iraq's attempts to purchase uranium from an African country.

Then, in January, President Bush, citing the British dossier, repeated the charges about Iraqi efforts to buy uranium from Africa.

The next day, I reminded a friend at the State Department of my trip and suggested that if the president had been referring to Niger, then his conclusion was not borne out by the facts as I understood them. He replied that perhaps the president was speaking about one of the other three African countries that produce uranium: Gabon, South Africa or Namibia. At the time, I accepted the explanation. I didn't know that in December, a month before the president's address, the State Department had published a

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fact sheet that mentioned the Niger case.

Those are the facts surrounding my efforts. The vice president's office asked a serious question. I was asked to help formulate the answer. I did so, and I have every confidence that the answer I provided was circulated to the appropriate officials within our government.

The question now is how that answer was or was not used by our political leadership. If my information was deemed inaccurate, I understand (though I would be very interested to know why). If, however, the information was ignored because it did not fit certain preconceptions about Iraq, then a legitimate argument can be made that we went to war under false pretenses. (It's worth remembering that in his March "Meet the Press" appearance, Mr. Cheney said that Saddam Hussein was "trying once again to produce nuclear weapons.") At a minimum, Congress, which authorized the use of military force at the president's behest, should want to know if the assertions about Iraq were warranted.

I was convinced before the war that the threat of weapons of mass destruction in the hands of Saddam Hussein required a vigorous and sustained international response to disarm him. Iraq possessed and had used chemical weapons; it had an active biological weapons program and quite possibly a nuclear research program — all of which were in violation of United Nations resolutions. Having encountered Mr. Hussein and his thugs in the run-up to the Persian Gulf war of 1991, I was only too aware of the dangers he posed.

But were these dangers the same ones the administration told us about? We have to find out. America's foreign policy depends on the sanctity of its information. For this reason, questioning the selective use of intelligence to justify the war in Iraq is neither idle sniping nor "revisionist history," as Mr. Bush has suggested. The act of war is the last option of a democracy, taken when there is a grave threat to our national security. More than 200 American soldiers have lost their lives in Iraq already. We have a duty to ensure that their sacrifice came for the right reasons.

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