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President Defends Allegation On Iraq

Bush Says CIA's Doubts Followed Jan. 28 Address

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President Bush yesterday defended the "darn good" intelligence he receives, continuing to stand behind a disputed allegation about Iraq's nuclear ambitions as new evidence surfaced indicating the administration had early warning that the charge could be false.

Bush said the CIA's doubts about the charge -- that Iraq sought to buy "yellowcake" uranium ore in Africa -- were "subsequent" to the Jan. 28 State of the Union speech in which Bush made the allegation. Defending the broader decision to go to war with Iraq, the president said the decision was made after he gave Saddam Hussein "a chance to allow the inspectors in, and he wouldn't let them in."

Bush's position was at odds with those of his own aides, who acknowledged over the weekend that the CIA raised doubts that

Iraq sought to buy uranium from Niger more than four months before Bush's speech.

The president's assertion that the war began because Iraq did not admit inspectors appeared to contradict the events leading up to war this spring: Hussein had, in fact, admitted the inspectors and Bush had opposed extending their work because he did not believe them effective.

In the face of persistent questioning about the use of intelligence before the Iraq war, administration officials have responded with evolving and sometimes contradictory statements. The matter has become increasingly charged, as Democrats demand hearings about Bush's broader use of intelligence to justify the Iraq war.

The president's remarks yesterday came as evidence emerged that the administration had information that seemed to guarantee that Iraq probably could not acquire nuclear material from Niger. A four-star general, who was asked to go to Niger last year to inquire about the security of Niger's uranium, told The Washington Post yesterday that he came away convinced the country's stocks were secure. The findings of Marine Gen. Carlton W. Fulford Jr. were passed up to Gen. Richard B. Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff -- though it was unclear whether they reached officials in the White House.

A spokesman for Myers said last night that the general has "no recollection of the information" but did not doubt that it had been forwarded to him.

"Given the time frame of 16 months ago, information concerning Iraq not obtaining uranium from Niger would not have been as pressing as other subjects," said Capt. Frank Thorp, the chairman's spokesman.

In an interview, Fulford said he came away "assured" that the supply of "yellowcake" was kept secure by a French consortium.

Both Fulford, then deputy commander of the U.S. European Command and his commander, Air Force Gen. Joseph Ralston, said the issue did not surface again, although they were both routinely briefed on weapons proliferation in Africa. "I was convinced it was not an issue," Fulford said.

Fulford was asked by the U.S. ambassador to Niger, BarbroOwens-Kirkpatrick, to join her at the meeting with Niger's President Mamadou Tandja on Feb. 24, 2002. "I was asked to impress upon the president the importance that the yellowcake in Niger be under control," Fulford said. "I did that. He assured me. He said the mining operations were handled through a French consortium" and therefore out of the Niger government's control. Owens-Kirkpatrick, reached by phone, declined to comment.

Fulford's impressions, while not conclusive, were similar to those of former ambassador Joseph C. Wilson, who traveled to Niger for the CIA in February 2002 to interview Niger officials about the uranium claim and came away convinced it was not true.

The charge that Iraq was seeking to buy nuclear material in Africa was based mainly on documents that the International Atomic Energy Agency concluded this March were forged. Before an October 2002 speech by Bush, the CIA succeeded in removing a reference to an Iraq-Niger connection because of doubts about the intelligence.

The charge was revived for the State of the Union speech in January but referred to Africa generally and attributed the information to the British, even though the CIA had expressed reservations to the British about including some of the information in its public dossier on Iraq.

In that speech, Bush stated: "The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa."

Since last Monday, the administration has offered changing explanations for that statement. At first, White House press secretary Ari Fleischer said the statement was simply wrong because it "was based and predicated on the yellowcake from Niger."

On Friday, Bush and top aides said the CIA approved the inclusion of those words, and CIA Director George J. Tenet took responsibility. Yet Bush aides have argued in recent days that the statement may, in fact, prove to be correct. Officials said Sunday the British had sources other than the forged documents, but they have declined to reveal them.

Yesterday Bush defended the charge as he fielded questions after a meeting in the Oval Office with U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan. "I think the intelligence I get is darn good intelligence," he said. "And the speeches I have given were backed by good intelligence. And I am absolutely convinced today, like I was convinced when I gave the speeches, that Saddam Hussein developed a program of weapons of mass destruction, and that our country made the right decision."

The president again noted that his speech was approved by the CIA and suggested that any doubts about the charge came after the speech. "The thing that's important to realize is that we're constantly gathering data," he said. "Subsequent to the speech, the CIA had some doubts. But when they talked about the speech and when they looked at the speech, it was cleared. Otherwise, I wouldn't have put it in the speech."

Bush's remarks added to contradictions that have been presented by administration officials as they have sought to explain the use of the uranium charge in the State of the Union speech.

Bush's communications director, Dan Bartlett, said last week that Bush was not angry to learn the charge was based on flawed

information. Bush himself has voiced no regret or irritation in public.

But at his briefing yesterday, Fleischer described a displeased Bush. "I assure you, the president is not pleased," he said. "The president, of course, would not be pleased if he said something in the State of the Union that may or may not have been true and should not have risen to his level."

Also, Bartlett, discussing the State of the Union address, said last week that "there was no debate or questions with regard to that line when it was signed off on." But on Friday, national security adviser Condoleezza Rice said there was "discussion on that specific sentence, so that it reflected better what the CIA thought." Rice said "some specifics about amount and place were taken out." Tenet said Friday that CIA officials objected, and "the language was changed."

Fleischer said yesterday Rice was not referring to the State of the Union reference but to Bush's October speech given in Cincinnati -- even though

Rice was not asked about that speech. Fleischer said that while the line cut from the October speech was based on the Niger allegations, he said the State of the Union claim was based on "additional reporting from the CIA, separate and apart from Niger, naming other countries where they believed it was possible that Saddam was seeking uranium."

But Fleischer's words yesterday contradicted his assertion a week earlier that the State of the Union charge was "based and predicated on the yellowcake from Niger." Rice was asked a month ago about Bush's State of the Union uranium claim on ABC's "This Week" and replied: "The intelligence community did not know at the time or at levels that got to us that there was

serious questions about this report." But senior administration officials acknowledged over the weekend that Tenet argued personally to White House officials, including deputy national security adviser Stephen Hadley, that the allegation should not be used in the October speech, four months before the State of the Union address.

CIA officials raised doubts about the Niger claims, as Tenet outlined Friday. The last time was when "CIA officials reviewing the draft remarks" of the State of the Union "raised several concerns about the fragmentary nature of the intelligence with National Security Council colleagues," Tenet's statement said. "Some of the language was changed."

The change included using British intelligence as the source of the information. The CIA, however, continued to doubt the reliability of the British claim.

Staff writer Walter Pincus contributed to this report.

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