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A Question of Trust

By Michael Duffy and James Carney

The State of the Union message is one of America's greatest inventions, conceived by the Founders to force a powerful Chief Executive to report to a public suspicious of kings. Delivered to a joint session of Congress in democracy's biggest cathedral, it is the most important speech a President gives each year, written and rewritten and then polished again. Yet the address George W. Bush gave on Jan. 28 was more consequential than most because he was making a revolutionary case: why a nation that traditionally didn't start fights should wage a pre-emptive war. As Bush noted that night, "Every year by law and by custom, we meet here to consider the state of the union. This year we gather in this chamber deeply aware of decisive days that lie ahead."

Just how aware was Bush of the accuracy of what he was about to say? Deep in his 5,400-word speech was a single sentence that had already been the subject of considerable internal debate for nearly a year. It was a line that had launched a dozen memos, several diplomatic tugs of war and some mysterious, last-minute pencil editing. The line—"The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa"—wasn't the Bush team's strongest evidence for the case that Saddam wanted nuclear weapons. It was just the most controversial, since most government experts familiar with the statement believed it to be unsupportable.

Last week the White House finally admitted that Bush should have jettisoned the claim. Designed to end a long-simmering controversy, the admission instead sparked a bewildering four days of changing explanations and unusually nasty finger pointing by the normally disciplined Bush team. That performance raised its own questions, which went to the core of the Administration's credibility. Where else did the U.S. stretch evidence to generate public support for the war? If so many doubted

the uranium allegations, who inside the government kept putting those allegations on the table? And did the CIA go far enough to keep the bad intelligence out?

To that last question, at least, the answer was: apparently not. In what looked like a command performance of political sacrifice, the head of the agency that expressed some of the strongest doubts about the charge took responsibility for the President's unsubstantiated claim. "The CIA approved the President's State of the Union address before it was delivered," said CIA Director George Tenet in a statement. "I am responsible for the approval process in my agency. And ... the President had every reason to believe that the text presented to him was sound. These 16 words should never have been included in the text written for the President."

Yet the controversy over those 16 words would not have erupted with such force were they not emblematic of larger concerns about Bush's reasoning for going to war in the first place. Making the case against Saddam last year, Bush claimed that Iraq's links to al-Qaeda and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) made the country an imminent threat to the region and, eventually, the U.S. He wrapped the evidence in the even more controversial doctrine of pre-emption, saying America could no longer wait for proof of its enemies' intentions before defending itself overseas—it must sometimes strike first, even without all the evidence in hand. Much of the world was appalled by this logic, but Congress and the American public went along. Four months after the war started, at least one piece of key evidence has turned out to be false, the U.S. has yet to find weapons of mass destruction, and American soldiers keep dying in a country that has not greeted its liberators the way the Administration predicted it would. Now the false assertion and the rising casualties are combining to take a toll on Bush's standing with the public.

FOLLOW THE YELLOWCAKE ROAD

How did a story that much of the national-security apparatus regarded as bogus wind up in the most important speech of Bush's term? The evidence suggests that many in the Bush Administration simply wanted to believe it. The tale begins in the early 1980s, when Iraq made two purchases of uranium oxide from Niger totaling more than 300 tons. Known as "yellowcake," uranium oxide is a partially refined ore that, when combined with fluorine and then converted into a gas, can eventually be used to create weapons-grade uranium. No one disputes that Iraq had a nuclear-weapons program in the 1980s, but it was dismantled after the first Gulf War. Then, in the mid-1990s, defectors provided evidence that Saddam was trying to restart the program.

Finally, late in 2001, the Italian government came into possession of evidence suggesting that Iraq

was again trying to purchase yellowcake from Niger. Rome's source provided half a dozen letters and other documents alleged to be correspondence between Niger and Iraqi officials negotiating a sale. The Italians' evidence was shared with both Britain and the U.S.

When it got to Washington, the Iraq-Niger uranium report caught the eye of someone important: Vice President Dick Cheney. Cheney's chief of staff, Lewis Libby, told TIME that during one of his regular CIA briefings, "the Vice President asked a question about the implication of the report." Cheney's interest hardly came as a surprise: he has long been known to harbor some of the most hard-line views of Saddam's nuclear ambitions. It was not long before the agency quietly dispatched veteran U.S. envoy named Joseph Wilson to investigate. Wilson seemed like a wise choice for the mission. He had been a U.S. ambassador to Gabon and had actually been the last American to speak with Saddam before the first Gulf War. Wilson spent eight days sleuthing in Niger, meeting with current and former government officials and businessmen; he came away convinced that the allegations were untrue. Wilson never had access to the Italian documents and never filed a written report, he told TIME. When he returned to Washington in early March, Wilson gave an oral report about his trip to both CIA and State Department officials. On March 9 of last year, the CIA circulated a memo on the yellowcake story that was sent to the White House, summarizing Wilson's assessment. Wilson was not the only official looking into the matter. Nine days earlier, the State Department's intelligence arm had sent a memo directly to Secretary of State Colin Powell that also disputed the Italian intelligence. Greg Thielmann, then a high-ranking official at State's research unit, told TIME that it was not in Niger's self-interest to sell the Iraqis the destabilizing ore. "A whole lot of things told us that the report was bogus," Thielmann said later. "This wasn't highly contested. There weren't strong advocates on the other side. It was done, shot down."

Except that it wasn't. By late summer, at the very moment that the Administration was gearing up to make its case for military mobilization, the yellowcake story took on new life. In September, Tony Blair's government issued a 50-page dossier detailing the case against Saddam, and while much of the evidence in the paper was old, it made the first public claim that Iraq was seeking uranium from Africa. At the White House, Ari Fleischer endorsed the British dossier, saying "We agree with their findings."

THE DOUBTS THAT DIDN'T GO AWAY

By now, a gap was opening behind the scenes between what U.S. officials were alleging in public about Iraq's nuclear ambitions and what they were saying in private. After Tenet left a closed hearing on Capitol Hill in September, the nuclear question arose, and a lower-ranking official admitted to the

lawmakers that the agency had doubts about the veracity of the evidence. Also in September, the CIA tried to persuade the British government to drop the allegation completely. To this day, London stands by the claim. In October, Tenet personally intervened with National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice's deputy, Stephen Hadley, to remove a line about the African ore in a speech that Bush was giving in Cincinnati, Ohio. Also that month, CIA officials included the Brits' yellowcake story in their classified 90-page National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq's weapons programs. The CIA said it could neither verify the Niger story nor "confirm whether Iraq succeeded in acquiring uranium ore and/or yellowcake" from two other African nations. The agency also included the State Department's concerns that the allegations of Iraq's seeking yellowcake were "highly dubious"—though that assessment was printed only as a footnote.

At a time when it was trying to build public support for the war, the Bush Administration did not share these internal doubts about the evidence with the public. In December, for example, the State Department included the Niger claim in its public eight-point rebuttal to the 12,200-page arms declaration that Iraq made to the U.N. two weeks earlier. And a month later, in an op-ed column in the *New York Times* titled "Why We Know Iraq Is Lying," top Bush aide Rice appeared to repeat the yellowcake claim, saying, "The declaration fails to account for or explain Iraq's efforts to get uranium from abroad." Nor did the U.S. pass on what it knew to international monitors. When the International Atomic Energy Agency, a U.N. group, asked the U.S. for data to back up its claim in December, Washington sat tight and said little for six weeks.

The battle between believers and doubters finally came to a head over the State of the Union speech. Weeks of work had gone into the address; speechwriters had produced two dozen drafts. But as the final form was taking shape, the wording of the yellowcake passage went down to the wire. When the time came to decide whether Bush was going to cite the allegation, the CIA objected—and then relented. Two senior Administration officials tell *TIME* that in a January conversation with a key National Security Council (nsc) official just a few days before the speech, a top cia analyst named Alan Foley objected to including the allegation in the speech. The nsc official in charge of vetting the sections on WMD, Special Assistant to the President Robert Joseph, denied through a spokesman that he said it was O.K. to use the line as long as it was sourced to British intelligence. But another official told *TIME*, "There was a debate about whether to cite it on our own intelligence. But once the U.K. made it public, we felt comfortable citing what they had learned." And so the line went in. While some argued last week that the fight should have been kicked upstairs to Rice for adjudication, White House officials claim that it never was.

NUCLEAR FALLOUT

But if it was good enough for bush, it wasn't good enough for others. Colin Powell omitted any reference to the uranium when he briefed the U.N. Security Council just eight days later; last week he told reporters that the allegation had not stood "the test of time." Nor did Tenet mention the allegation when he testified before the Senate panel on Feb. 11. "If we were trying to peddle that theory, it would have been in our white paper," an intelligence official told TIME. "It would have been in lots of places where it wasn't. A sentence made it into the President's speech, and it shouldn't have."

Did Bush really need to push the WMD case so hard to convince Americans that Saddam should be ousted? In a TIME poll taken four weeks before coalition forces invaded, 83% of Americans thought war was justified on the grounds that "Saddam Hussein is a dictator who has killed many citizens of his Iraq." That's one claim that has never been contested. In the same TIME poll, however, 72% of Americans thought war was also justified because it "will help eliminate weapons of mass destruction in Iraq."

The unseen threat of a Saddam with WMD was an argument that played to Bush's strengths. As a politician, Bush has always been better at asserting his case than at making it. After 9/11, his sheer certitude—and the faith Americans had in his essential trustworthiness—led Americans to overwhelmingly support him. The yellowcake affair may have already changed that relationship, for as the casualties mount in Iraq, polls suggest that some of that faith is eroding. Which means the next time Bush tells the nation where he wants to go, it may not be so quick to follow.

—*With reporting by Massimo Calabresi, Matthew Cooper and Adam Zagorin/Washington, John F. Dickerson with Bush in Africa, J.F.O. McAllister/London and Andrew Purvis/Vienna*

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