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Final Edition**SECTION:** A SECTION; Pg. A01**LENGTH:** 1381 words**HEADLINE:** CIA Did Not Share Doubt on Iraq Data;
Bush Used Report Of Uranium Bid**BYLINE:** Walter Pincus, Washington Post Staff Writer**BODY:**

A key component of President Bush's claim in his State of the Union address last January that Iraq had an active nuclear weapons program -- its alleged attempt to buy uranium in Niger -- was disputed by a CIA-directed mission to the central African nation in early 2002, according to senior administration officials and a former government official. But the CIA did not pass on the detailed results of its investigation to the White House or other government agencies, the officials said.

The CIA's failure to share what it knew, which has not been disclosed previously, was one of a number of steps in the Bush administration that helped keep the uranium story alive until the eve of the war in Iraq, when the United Nations' chief nuclear inspector told the Security Council that the claim was based on fabricated evidence.

A senior intelligence official said the CIA's action was the result of "extremely sloppy" handling of a central piece of evidence in the administration's case against then-Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. But, the official added, "It is only one fact and not the reason we went to war. There was a lot more."

However, a senior CIA analyst said the case "is indicative of larger problems" involving the handling of intelligence about Iraq's alleged chemical, biological and nuclear weapons programs and its links to al Qaeda, which the administration cited as justification for war. "Information not consistent with the administration agenda was discarded and information that was [consistent] was not seriously scrutinized," the analyst said.

As the controversy over Iraq intelligence has expanded with the failure so far of U.S. teams in Iraq to uncover proscribed weapons, intelligence officials have accused senior administration policymakers of pressuring the CIA or exaggerating intelligence information to make the case for war. The story involving the CIA's uranium-purchase probe, however, suggests that the agency also was shaping intelligence on Iraq to meet the administration's policy goals.

Sen. Bob Graham (D-Fla.), former chairman of the Select Committee on Intelligence and a candidate for president, yesterday described the case as "part of the agency's standard operating procedure when it wants to advance the information that supported their [the administration's] position and bury that which didn't."

Armed with information purportedly showing that Iraqi officials had been seeking to buy uranium in Niger one or two years earlier, the CIA in early February 2002 dispatched a retired U.S. ambassador to the country to investigate the claims, according to the senior U.S. officials and the former government official, who is familiar with the event. The sources spoke on condition of anonymity and on condition that the name of the former ambassador not be disclosed.

During his trip, the CIA's envoy spoke with the president of Niger and other Niger officials mentioned as being

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involved in the Iraqi effort, some of whose signatures purportedly appeared on the documents.

After returning to the United States, the envoy reported to the CIA that the uranium-purchase story was false, the sources said. Among the envoy's conclusions was that the documents may have been forged because the "dates were wrong and the names were wrong," the former U.S. government official said.

However, the CIA did not include details of the former ambassador's report and his identity as the source, which would have added to the credibility of his findings, in its intelligence reports that were shared with other government agencies. Instead, the CIA only said that Niger government officials had denied the attempted deal had taken place, a senior administration said.

"This gent made a visit to the region and chatted up his friends," a senior intelligence official said, describing the agency's view of the mission. "He relayed back to us that they said it was not true and that he believed them."

Thirteen months later, on March 8, Mohamed ElBaradei, director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, informed the U.N. Security Council that after careful scrutiny of the Niger documents, his agency had reached the same conclusion as the CIA's envoy. ElBaradei deemed the documents "not authentic," an assessment that U.S. officials did not dispute.

Knowledgeable sources familiar with the forgery investigation have described the faked evidence as a series of letters between Iraqi agents and officials in Niger. The documents had been sought by U.N. inspectors since September 2002 and they were delivered by the United States and Britain last February.

The President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, a panel of nongovernment experts that is reviewing the handling of Iraq intelligence, is planning to study the Niger story and how it made its way into Bush's State of the Union address on Jan. 28. In making the case that Iraq had an ongoing nuclear weapons program, Bush declared that "the British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa."

That same month, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld and national security adviser Condoleezza Rice also mentioned Iraq's alleged attempts to buy uranium, and the story made its way into a State Department "fact sheet" as well.

Rep. Henry A. Waxman (Calif.), the ranking Democrat on the Government Reform Committee and a leading administration critic, wrote the president June 2 asking why Bush had included the Niger case as part of the evidence he cited against Iraq. "Given what the CIA knew at the time, the implication you intended -- that there was credible evidence that Iraq sought uranium from Africa -- was simply false," Waxman said.

The CIA's decision to send an emissary to Niger was triggered by questions raised by an aide to Vice President Cheney during an agency briefing on intelligence circulating about the purported Iraqi efforts to acquire the uranium, according to the senior officials. Cheney's staff was not told at the time that its concerns had been the impetus for a CIA mission and did not learn it occurred or its specific results.

Cheney and his staff continued to get intelligence on the matter, but the vice president, unlike other senior administration officials, never mentioned it in a public speech. He and his staff did not learn of its role in spurring the mission until it was disclosed by New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof on May 6, according to an administration official.

When the British government published an intelligence document on Iraq in September 2002 claiming that Baghdad had "sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa," the former ambassador called the CIA officers who sent him to Niger and was told they were looking into new information about the claim, sources said. The former envoy later called the CIA and State Department after Bush's State of the Union speech and was told "not to worry," according to one U.S. official.

Later it was disclosed that the United States and Britain were basing their reports on common information that originated with forged documents provided originally by Italian intelligence officials.

CIA Director George J. Tenet, on Sept. 24, 2002, cited the Niger evidence in a closed-door briefing to the Senate intelligence committee on a national intelligence estimate of Iraq's weapons programs; sources said. Although Tenet told the panel that some questions had been raised about the evidence, he did not mention that the agency had sent an envoy to Niger and that the former ambassador had concluded that the claims were false.

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The Niger evidence was not included in Secretary of State Colin L. Powell's Feb. 5 address to the Security Council in which he disclosed some intelligence on Iraq's alleged weapons programs and links to al Qaeda because it was considered inaccurate, sources said.

Even so, the Voice of America on Feb. 20 broadcast a story that said: "U.S. officials tell VOA [that] Iraq and Niger signed an agreement in the summer of 2000 to resume shipments for an additional 500 tons of yellow cake," a reference to the uranium. The VOA, which is financed by the government but has an official policy of editorial independence, went on to say that there was no evidence such shipments had taken place.

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