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White House in Denial

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

Let me give the White House a hand.

Condoleezza Rice was asked on "Meet the Press" on Sunday about a column of mine from May 6 regarding President Bush's reliance on forged documents to claim that Iraq had sought uranium in Africa. That was not just a case of hyping intelligence, but of asserting something that had already been flatly discredited by an envoy investigating at the behest of the office of Vice President Dick Cheney.

Ms. Rice acknowledged that the president's information turned out to be "not credible," but insisted that the White House hadn't realized this until after Mr. Bush had cited it in his State of the Union address.

And now an administration official tells The Washington Post that Mr. Cheney's office first learned of its role in the episode by reading that column of mine. Hmm. I have an offer for Mr. Cheney: I'll tell you everything I know about your activities, if you'll tell me all you know.

To help out Ms. Rice and Mr. Cheney, let me offer some more detail about the uranium saga. Piecing the story together from two people directly involved and three others who were briefed on it, the tale begins at the end of 2001, when third-rate forged documents turned up in West Africa purporting to show the sale by Niger to Iraq of tons of "yellowcake" uranium.

Italy's intelligence service obtained the documents and shared them with British spooks, who passed them on to Washington. Mr. Cheney's office got wind of this and asked the C.I.A. to investigate.

The agency chose a former ambassador to Africa to undertake the mission, and that person flew to Niamey, Niger, in the last week of February 2002. This envoy spent one week in Niger, staying at the Sofitel and discussing his findings with the U.S. ambassador to Niger, and then flew back to Washington via Paris.

Immediately upon his return, in early March 2002, this senior envoy briefed the C.I.A. and State Department and reported that the documents were bogus, for two main reasons. First, the documents seemed phony on their face — for example, the Niger minister of energy and mines who had signed them had left that position years earlier. Second, an examination of Niger's uranium industry showed that an international consortium controls the yellowcake closely, so the Niger government does not have any yellowcake to sell.

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Officials now claim that the C.I.A. inexplicably did not report back to the White House with this envoy's findings and reasoning, or with an assessment of its own that the information was false. I hear something different. My understanding is that while Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet may not have told Mr. Bush that the Niger documents were forged, lower C.I.A. officials did tell both the vice president's office and National Security Council staff members. Moreover, I hear from another source that the C.I.A.'s operations side and its counterterrorism center undertook their own investigations of the documents, poking around in Italy and Africa, and also concluded that they were false — a judgment that filtered to the top of the C.I.A.

Meanwhile, the State Department's intelligence arm, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, independently came to the exact same conclusion about those documents, according to Greg Thielmann, a former official there. Mr. Thielmann said he was "quite confident" that the conclusion had been passed up to the top of the State Department.

"It was well known throughout the intelligence community that it was a forgery," said Melvin Goodman, a former C.I.A. analyst who is now at the Center for International Policy.

Still, Mr. Tenet and the intelligence agencies were under intense pressure to come up with evidence against Iraq. Ambiguities were lost, and doubters were discouraged from speaking up.

"It was a foregone conclusion that every photo of a trailer truck would be a 'mobile bioweapons lab' and every tanker truck would be 'filled with weaponized anthrax,'" a former military intelligence officer said. "None of the analysts in military uniform had the option to debate the vice president, secretary of defense and the secretary of state."

I don't believe that the president deliberately lied to the public in an attempt to scare Americans into supporting his war. But it does look as if ideologues in the administration deceived themselves about Iraq's nuclear programs — and then deceived the American public as well.

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