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The CIA Did It

By this time, the main facts are clear about the great uranium/Niger caper. Throughout official Washington, officials had known for a year that the intelligence report was a fraud. Letters said to show that Saddam Hussein had bought 500 tons of uranium "yellow cake" ore were obvious forgeries.

The U.S. ambassador had reported that fact. CIA officials knew it and left it out of their annual National Intelligence Estimate. The State Department knew it, and Secretary Colin Powell avoided it in his speech to the United Nations. The Senate Intelligence Committee knew it. And Vice President Dick Cheney's office had asked for an investigator to go to Niger, and the check came back negative.

Yet President Bush needed one more persuasive zinger because public support for the planned Iraq invasion was beginning to slip. So he used the widely suspect evidence in his January 28 State of the Union address. When a major flap developed last week as Mr. Bush was touring Africa, he said the speech had been "cleared by the intelligence services." And CIA Director George

J. Tenet promptly took the blame.

But a couple of points remained off key. Mr. Tenet's carefully worded statement merely said that other CIA officials had approved the speech in advance and that he was "responsible for the approval process in my agency." Mr. Tenet was just going through the motions, like a ship captain who must take the blame for a wreck that wasn't his fault. He added that the agency had kept the allegation out of other earlier official speeches because "we had questions about some of the reporting."

People just laugh when a schoolboy says, "the dog ate my homework." But when the dog admits he ate it, the alibi may stick. The question now is whether Congress will accept the president's conclusion that the matter is closed and it's time to move on. Given the number of other questions around the President Bush's decision to lead the nation to war, moving on before the public knows where the administration has been, seems unlikely and unwise.