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A Classic Case of Incompetence . . .

By Jim Hoagland

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With significant help from his top aides, President Bush has managed to shoot himself and British Prime Minister Tony Blair in their combined four feet in a minor intelligence controversy that threatens to obscure the real problems of U.S. assessments of Iraq before and during the Second Gulf War.

The flap over what the CIA told the Bush White House about Iraqi efforts to buy uranium in Africa is a classic Washington case of going for the capillary rather than the jugular -- of pounding on a superficial but politically symbolic issue rather than examining the tougher and more complex institutional questions about intelligence that the Iraq crisis raises.

Part of the "yellowcake" controversy is payback by intelligence professionals trained in the arts of disinformation and spreading confusion. The political leadership of the administration declared war on the careerists at the CIA soon after Bush's election. There should be no surprise that analysts who feel their insights have been scorned and attacked would use this opportunity to get even.

But their efforts would have made little headway without two more important factors: a spreading uneasiness in public opinion with the nasty incipient guerrilla war in Iraq, where American soldiers continue to die, and the sudden tone-deafness of a Bush team that had been pretty good at not giving its enemies ammunition to use against it.

Bush seemed not to have registered the growing disquiet about U.S. casualties inflicted by Baathist loyalists when he brashly declared on July 2, "Bring 'em on." Such red-meat rhetoric has generally played well for the president since 9/11. This time it made him seem either out of touch with or not sympathetic toward the dangers faced by American troops.

More puzzling is the decision by Bush and his top aides to respond with finger-pointing of their own to anonymous leaks accusing them of ignoring CIA doubts about a 16-word assertion in the president's State of the Union address, when Bush said Britain had learned that Iraq was trying to buy uranium in Africa. The White House sought to shift full responsibility to the CIA and pushed Director George Tenet into the middle of an escalating political crossfire.

Worse, in a subsequent series of shifting and at times contradictory accounts, the White House called the information about Africa incorrect -- even though Blair stands by a case that is on its face still entirely plausible. The impression left has been one of a president seeking to deflect all blame onto others -- and not doing a very good job of it.

Competence is fast becoming the central issue on Iraq. The resonance of the uranium controversy represents a blinking warning light for Bush, who needs to reestablish for Americans that he knows where he is going in Iraq and that the destination is reachable in a reasonable amount of time.

Bush can ill afford to give the controversy new life by letting Tenet go in these circumstances. Moreover, Tenet has responded with agility and skill to Bush's orders to transform the CIA's operations directorate into a paramilitary force, which has contributed to U.S. battlefield victories in Afghanistan

and Iraq. Tenet and the agency deserve understanding for the sudden mission changes they have had to absorb.

The White House, congressional oversight committees and the public must not let the intramural quibbling over footnotes and disputed briefings distract attention from the serious intelligence failure that surfaced during the war. That failure was the long-standing lack of human intelligence sources developed by the CIA to predict with accuracy the intentions and capabilities of Saddam Hussein and his regime.

This is not to underestimate the difficulty of espionage operations in a totalitarian police state. That effort requires years of dangerous and detailed preparation.

In that sense, the essential "politicization" of the agency on Iraq occurred long before Bush's last State of the Union speech. It occurred in the decade in which the Bush 41, Clinton and Bush 43 administrations minimized the threat Iraq posed to U.S. interests and frowned on assertions to the contrary. Hussein was "in a box." The agency understood it did not need to exert extraordinary efforts to penetrate that box. Only the horror of 9/11 changed this view.

Tenet himself is given to describing the CIA's basic job as "stealing other people's secrets." The surprises posed by still-missing weapons of mass destruction, the Baathists' guerrilla-style insurgency and the initial political turmoil of central and southern Iraq suggest that the agency did not meet Tenet's own standard in this crisis. That is the real intelligence problem. It cannot be swept under the rug.

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