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Bush Aides Disclose Warnings From CIA

Oct. Memos Raised Doubts on Iraq Bid

by Dana Milbank and Walter Pincus

The CIA sent two memos to the White House in October voicing strong doubts about a claim President Bush made three months later in the State of the Union address that Iraq was trying to buy nuclear material in Africa, White House officials said yesterday.

The officials made the disclosure hours after they were alerted by the CIA to the existence of a memo sent to Bush's deputy national security adviser, Stephen J. Hadley, on Oct. 6. The White House said Bush's chief speechwriter, Michael Gerson, on Friday night discovered another memo from the CIA, dated Oct. 5, also expressing doubts about the Africa claims.

The information, provided in a briefing by Hadley and Bush communications director Dan Bartlett, significantly alters the explanation previously offered by the White House. The acknowledgment of the memos, which were sent on the eve of a major presidential speech in Cincinnati about Iraq, comes four days after the White House said the CIA objected only to technical specifics of the Africa charge, not its general accuracy.

In fact, the officials acknowledged yesterday, the CIA warned the White House early on that the charge, based on an allegation that Iraq sought 500 tons of uranium in Niger, relied on weak evidence, was not particularly significant and assumed Iraq was pursuing an acquisition that was arguably not possible and of questionable value because Iraq had its own supplies.

Yesterday's disclosures indicate top White House officials knew that the CIA seriously disputed the claim that Saddam Hussein was seeking uranium in Africa long before the claim was included in Bush's January address to the nation. The claim was a major part of the case made by the Bush administration before the Iraq war that Hussein represented a serious threat because of his nuclear ambitions; other pieces of evidence have also been challenged.

Hadley, who also received a phone call from CIA Director George J. Tenet before the president's Oct. 7 speech asking that the Africa allegation be removed, took the blame for allowing the charge to be revived in the State of the Union address. "I should have recalled . . . that there was controversy associated with the uranium issue," he said. He said Bush and national security adviser Condoleezza Rice were counting on his dependability, and "it is now clear to me that I failed." Hadley said Rice was not made aware of the doubts but "feels personal responsibility as well."

"The high standards that the president set with his speeches were not met," Hadley said, acknowledging that the problem was not solely that the CIA failed to strike the reference from the January speech. "We had opportunities here to avoid this problem. We didn't take them," he said.

It remains unclear why the Africa uranium claim continued to bubble up in key presidential speeches. White House officials insist they did not push hard for the accusation to be included, and the intelligence community largely dismissed the significance of the matter.

The intelligence reports about Iraq seeking uranium from Niger, Somalia and Congo represented only four paragraphs in the Oct. 2 National Intelligence Estimate, the definitive collection of U.S. intelligence's views on Iraq's weapons programs. Iraq's alleged attempt to obtain uranium was not among the "key judgments" used in the report to support the idea that Hussein was reconstituting his nuclear program. Yet the White House twice sought to include it in a presidential speech.

Yesterday, Bartlett insisted that its inclusion in the State of the Union address was "not at the specific request of

anyone" and said that one of the speechwriters had come up with the information after reviewing the Oct. 2 intelligence estimate.

The new information amounted to an on-the-record mea culpa for a White House that had pointed fingers at the CIA for vetting the speech, prompting an earlier acceptance of responsibility by Tenet. But that abruptly changed yesterday after the CIA furnished evidence that it had fought the inclusion of the charge.

The disclosures punctured claims made by Rice and others in the past two weeks. Rice and other officials had asserted that nobody in the White House knew of CIA objections, and that the CIA supported the Africa accusation generally, making only technical objections about location and quantity. On Friday, a White House official mischaracterized the CIA's objections, saying repeatedly that Tenet opposed the inclusion in Bush's Oct. 7 speech "because it was single source, not because it was flawed."

Shortly after Friday's briefing, Bartlett and Hadley said yesterday, Gerson discovered the first of two CIA memos to the White House from last October. The CIA memo, dated Oct. 5 and addressed to Gerson, Hadley and others, objected to a sentence that the White House included in a draft of Bush's upcoming speech, saying Hussein's "regime has been caught attempting to purchase" uranium in Africa. The officials did not release the memo but said the uranium information was on Page 3 of a four-page document.

Hadley said the CIA -- the memo was not signed -- noted that the amount was in dispute and that it was not clear the material "can be acquired from the source." The CIA also pointed out that Iraq already had its own supply, 500 tons, of the "yellowcake" uranium ore it was accused of seeking.

The second memo, dated Oct. 6 and sent to Hadley and Rice, was brought to the White House's attention yesterday by the CIA, the officials said. In response to another draft of the speech that had already deleted the uranium reference, the memo included fresh CIA objections to the charge, saying there was "weakness in the evidence" and that the attempted purchase "was not particularly significant," Hadley said.

The new information disclosed by the White House provides additional material for Democrats who have been criticizing Bush's handling of Iraq intelligence. Sen. Bob Graham (D-Fla.), a former intelligence committee chairman and now a presidential candidate, said the admission "raises sharp new questions as to who at the White House engaged in a coverup." Rep. Henry A. Waxman (D-Calif.), who has been pressing the administration on the matter for months, said, "Congress needs to investigate this with immediate public hearings."

But strategists in both political parties said the lifespan of the criticism, and the possibility of congressional hearings in the fall, largely depends on whether the occupation of Iraq continues to be as violent and chaotic as it has been. Yesterday's disclosures by the White House came at a time of otherwise good news related to Iraq, as the U.S. military confirmed that it had killed Hussein's two sons, Uday and Qusay, and Army Pfc. Jessica Lynch, a rescued prisoner of war, returned to her home town in West Virginia after four months of hospitalization.

Bartlett said he was "almost positive" Bush saw a draft of the October speech containing the Africa claim. "He has no memory of this subtraction being made," Bartlett said.

Bartlett said that while the president is "obviously not pleased," he "accepts the explanation" offered by his aides and has "the highest level of confidence" in his staff. Hadley and Tenet have taken some responsibility for the Africa charge being included in Bush's January speech.

"The president had every reason to believe that the text of the State of the Union was sound," Hadley said.

Hadley, who told Bush of the forgotten memos, declined to say whether he had offered the president his resignation, and Bartlett said he does not expect any resignations.

But Hadley said the issue is not necessarily resolved. "There is always the likelihood we will find additional information," he said.