

Travails of Intelligence Assessment: From Failed to Fertile Imagination

S Kalyanaraman

Abstract

September 11, according to the Commission that investigated that catastrophic event, was a result of a failure of imagination. Iraq's non-existent weapons of mass destruction, on the other hand, could be characterised as a case of fertile imagination exhibited by US intelligence and the George W. Bush Administration. Intelligence failure is the facile answer given to describe what went wrong in both cases. This article offers a more nuanced answer that takes into account the political context in which the threat posed by Osama bin Laden was analysed and acted upon. In the case of Iraq, the article details the pre-determined orientation of several senior members of the Bush Administration to effect regime change in Baghdad and how this inexorably traversed down the line within the US intelligence bureaucracy.

-*-

Intelligence failure is the facile answer given to describe what went wrong in preventing the September 11, 2001 attacks. A more nuanced explanation, however, would take into account the political context within which these assessments were made. September 11 happened in an international geopolitical environment that is best captured by the fuzzy phrase 'the post-Cold War era,' the chief characteristic of which was not a direct military threat from one or more Great Powers but a multiplicity of diplomatic and military interventions around the world designed to maintain peace and stability. Even though by the late 1990s, the US intelligence community had begun to realise the growing threat posed by Osama bin Laden, terrorism was never listed as *the* threat facing the United States. The first part of this article details the events and policy responses in the period before September 11, and offers a critical analysis of the 9/11 Commission Report.

Part two deals with the exaggerated intelligence estimates about Iraq's Weapons

Strategic Analysis, Vol. 29, No. 1, Jan-Mar 2005

© Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses

of Mass Destruction (WMD). In this case again, it is important to understand the political context in which the assessment was made. Several senior members of the Bush Administration came into office determined to effect regime change in Iraq. September 11 and the fusion of the terrorism-WMD threat provided them an opportunity to exploit fears in this regard. The US intelligence community merely served as a tool of White House policy to portray links between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaida as well as claim that Iraq was indeed engaged in the process of acquiring WMD so that the Bush Administration could have the war that it had come into office determined to wage.

Failure of Imagination: The September 11 Attacks

September 11 and the US declaration of a 'War on Terror' have been described as the beginning of the Third or the Fourth World War – the other three being the two World Wars and the Cold War.¹ The conflict between the US and militant fundamentalist Islamists had begun to brew in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, during the last decade of which they had actually been allies in Afghanistan against the godless communists. A prescient Bernard Lewis identified the coming 'clash of civilisations' between the modern, secular West and militant fundamentalist Islamists as early as September 1990 in his seminal essay, "The Roots of Muslim Rage." Samuel Huntington gave greater prominence to this idea in subsequent years. Equally prescient critiques of this thesis in these years suggested that it would become a self-fulfilling prophecy and engender a bunker mentality.²

Osama bin Laden formally declared a jihad on the United States in August 1996. Issued "From the Peaks of the Hindu Kush, Afghanistan," this declaration commanded his followers to attack Israelis and Americans and cause them "as much harm as can be possibly achieved."³ He followed this up with another *fatwa* in February 1998, which stated that "killing Americans and their allies, both civil and military, is an individual duty of every Muslim...until the Aqsa Mosque and the Haram Mosque are freed from their grip and until their armies, shattered and broken-winged, depart from all the lands of Islam..."⁴ These calls for jihad were followed by the twin bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998; the failed millennium plot to bomb the Los Angeles international airport and a target in Jordan; and the bombing of the *USS Cole* at Aden in October 2000. September 11 was the capstone of this terror campaign.

The origins of Osama's overt resentment towards the US can be traced to the Saudi decision to seek US military assistance in the wake of Iraq's annexation of Kuwait rather than depend on his army of Islamic volunteers who, he asserted,

would defeat Saddam Hussein in a guerrilla war. This seems to have been later fanned into full-blown rage when the US pressured Sudan to deny him sanctuary. Within weeks of his arrival in Afghanistan, Osama informed a British journalist that the Americans were the “main enemy” of Muslims worldwide and that the world has reached “the beginning of the war between Muslims and the United States.”⁵ His rage at the US was also greatly fuelled by the Israeli military attack on the UN refugee camp at Qana, Lebanon, in April 1996, and more generally by what he interpreted as Washington’s anti-Muslim policies including its support for Israel and Israeli actions in the region.⁶ Furthermore, anti-Americanism was a *sine qua non* among Islamists with whom Osama had been closely associated during the Afghan jihad of the 1980s.

In January 1996, eight months before Osama issued his first *fatwa* against the US, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had set up a special ‘virtual’ station code-named ‘Alex’ to track Osama who was then based in Sudan and whose activities in support of terrorism had increasingly begun to assume a transnational dimension. The previous year-and-a-half had seen a surge in worldwide terrorist activity perpetrated by Arab veterans of the Afghan jihad. In January 1995, the plot by Ramzi Yousef and Khalid Shaikh Mohammed to blow up a dozen US airliners over the Pacific was discovered.⁷ Till 1997, the US intelligence community essentially viewed Osama as “a financier of terrorism, and not as a terrorist leader.” It was only after the 1998 *fatwa* and the bombings of the two US embassies in Africa that the threat was taken seriously, and the US military tasked to prepare an array of limited strike options to target Osama and the Al Qaida. The goal was to apprehend and bring him to justice or alternately kill him during such an ‘extraction’ attempt or through precision missile strikes. Simultaneously, efforts were also made to force the Taliban and Pakistan to turn Osama over to American authorities.⁸ By this time, American intelligence officials were also aware of Osama’s ambition to inflict “thousands of deaths” on the US and connected this with the Al Qaida’s interest in acquiring chemical weapons.⁹

On August 20, 1998, in response to the embassy bombings in Africa, the Clinton Administration launched a volley of cruise missiles against a factory in Sudan, which allegedly manufactured chemical weapon agents, as well as against Al Qaida camps in Afghanistan. According to staffers then serving at the US National Security Council, American intelligence had gathered, prior to the missile attacks, soil samples from the al-Shifa factory site in Sudan, which had indicated the presence of EMPTA – a precursor chemical principally used in the synthesis of the nerve agent, VX.¹⁰ But this evidence has generally been discounted and Clinton’s response dismissed as an attempt to divert attention from the Monica Lewinsky

affair. The soil sample was actually collected by an Egyptian agent working with the CIA, which had closed its embassy at Khartoum in 1996. As James Bamford has disclosed, “without an embassy, the CIA is without spies.” Moreover, two years earlier, the agency had been forced to withdraw more than 200 of its intelligence reports on Sudan after it became evident that its key source was a fabricator.¹¹

In the wake of the failure to take Osama out and the controversy generated by the targeting of the ‘pharmaceutical’ factory, senior military officials as well as policy-makers began to emphasise upon “actionable intelligence as the key factor in recommending or deciding to launch military action.” This stemmed from the need to avoid civilian casualties as well as to ensure that Osama was not missed the next time around, which, it was felt, would only make him appear stronger.¹² Moreover, the Clinton Administration tied its own hands by consistently trying to cajole the Taliban into changing its worldview and handing over Osama bin Laden.¹³ In any event, it simply did not yet have a compelling justification to wage a military campaign against the Taliban.

Despite the realisation about the growing threat posed by the Al Qaida, there was a general failure to grasp the fact that Osama and his outfit had emerged as the most important threat facing the US. After all, as Clinton’s National Security Adviser Sandy Berger pointed out during the course of his testimony to the Joint Inquiry Committee in September 2002, only 67 Americans had been killed in terrorist attacks during the Clinton presidency. Even after CIA Director George Tenet declared in December 1998 that “we are at war” and that no resources or people should be spared to counter the terrorist threat, nothing changed very much at the Agency. Moreover, other intelligence agencies did not take notice of Tenet’s designation of the Osama bin Laden threat as ‘Tier 0,’ the very highest. Furthermore, despite these pronouncements, Tenet himself did not describe Osama as the gravest and most important threat. Instead, he listed it at second place and devoted only four out of 97 paragraphs to Osama in a February 1999 unclassified statement.¹⁴

Outside of the government, most Americans had never heard of the Al Qaida, including senior members of the incoming Bush Administration till as late as January 2001.¹⁵ In any event, the Bush national security team was focused elsewhere – rebuilding and restructuring the American military; dealing with ‘strategic competitor’ China; building a ballistic missile defence system to defend against threats posed by ‘rogue’ states; and regime change in Iraq.¹⁶ Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had his own agenda. In a talk delivered to the Pentagon workforce on

September 10, 2001, he declared war against the “adversary that poses a threat, a serious threat, to the security of the United States of America.” This adversary was “the Pentagon bureaucracy.”¹⁷

Given that the Bush Administration’s priorities did not include countering terrorism, the threat from the Al Qaida was not taken seriously even when it was brought to the attention of policy-makers. Thus, National Coordinator for Security, Infrastructure Protection and Counter-Terrorism Richard Clarke’s plea in the very first week of the Bush presidency for holding a Cabinet-level meeting to “review the imminent Al Qaida threat” was ignored. And when finally, deputies to cabinet officials took up the matter in April 2001, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz expressed his inability to understand “why we are beginning by talking about this one man, Osama bin Laden...” He then reverted to the discredited notion that the 1993 terrorist attack on the WTC must have had help from a state actor in the form of Iraq.¹⁸

Report of the 9/11 Commission: A Critique

The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the US, known as the 9/11 Commission, reported that “[t]he most important failure was one of imagination. We do not believe leaders understood the gravity of the threat. The terrorist danger from Bin Ladin [sic] and Al Qaida was not a major topic for policy debate among the public, the media, or in the Congress. Indeed, it barely came up during the 2000 presidential campaign.”¹⁹

More specifically, the Commission has detailed the failure of US intelligence agencies to piece together all that they knew about the activities of individual terrorists involved in the plot. Three weeks before September 11, Zacarias Moussaoui was arrested for violating immigration regulations and it was known that he had sought fast-track training on piloting large jet airliners. Subsequently, intelligence officials realised that two Al Qaida operatives under surveillance in Kuala Lumpur and whose trail they quickly lost in Bangkok had arrived in the US. Though the CIA had known by early 2000 that one of these men had a multi-entry visa to the US, his name was not submitted to the State Department’s terrorist watch list, and information and evidence about him was not communicated to the FBI.²⁰ Even after the realisation that the two men were in the US and that one of them was linked with terrorists involved in the attack on *USS Cole*, no efforts were made to locate them. This occurred in spite of the high level of threat reporting taking place at that time within the intelligence establishment. Through the Spring and Summer of 2001, US intelligence agencies received a “stream of warnings”

that the Al Qaida was planning “something very, very, very big.” In his testimony to the 9/11 Commission, CIA Director George Tenet stated that “[t]he system was blinking red.”²¹ Even President Bush had been warned in an August 6, 2001, Presidential Daily Brief that Osama bin Laden was, as the title of the brief stated, “determined to strike in US.”²²

The 9/11 Commission also identified several deficiencies in the intelligence apparatus. The CIA, for example, did not have adequate capability to collect intelligence from human agents. Its Chief had only limited authority over the “direction of the intelligence community, including agencies within the Department of Defense.” For its part, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) “did not have the capability to link the collective knowledge of agents in the field to national priorities.” In addition, the intelligence management did not ensure that all available knowledge about the Al Qaida “was shared and duties assigned across agencies, and across the foreign-domestic divide.” There was no mechanism to pool intelligence and use it to “guide the planning and assignment of responsibilities for joint operations involving entities as disparate as the CIA, the FBI, the State Department, the military, and the agencies involved in homeland security.”²³

Based on the above, the Commission identified two principal problems. One, the inability to ‘connect the dots’, i.e., not connecting the various pieces of information that were known in different parts of the system due to lack of coordination. Two, ‘group think’, i.e., the inability to imagine that such an attack could take place on US soil. To rectify these deficiencies, it recommended the creation of a national counter-terrorism centre that would unify strategic intelligence and operational planning against Islamist terrorists across the foreign-domestic divide in the ongoing War on Terror, and the appointment of a National Intelligence Director (NID) to unify the intelligence community spread over several departments.²⁴ Bush appointed Ambassador John Negroponte as the NID in February 2005, and earlier, in August 2004, authorised the creation of a national counter-terrorism centre to oversee efforts both within and outside of the United States.²⁵

But as the Commission Report itself points out, there was indeed an instance of information about terrorism flowing “widely and abundantly” between December 1999 and early January 2000. And this happened mainly because “everyone was already on edge with the millennium and possible computer programming glitches (‘Y2K’).” The problem with the Commission’s conclusions and recommendations—that the clear and present danger facing the United States is posed by Islamist terrorists and hence measures should be taken to tackle this on a war footing –

could lead to excessive focus on a single risk and the consequent neglect of other threats. Moreover, given the existence of 15 different intelligence agencies spread over several departments, the NID would be “in continuous conflict” with several cabinet-level functionaries, including the Attorney General, the Secretary of Defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Secretary of Homeland Security and the National Security Adviser.²⁶ Negroponte, whose nomination has not yet been confirmed by the US Congress, has the unenviable job of imposing order and coordinating the work of the 15 agencies. Though he has been designated as “the head of the intelligence community,” his “exclusive milestone decision authority” does not extend to programmes run by the US Department of Defense, which controls 85 per cent of the intelligence apparatus.²⁷ It is not clear what kind of a ‘czar’ this makes him or why he has been designated “the head of the intelligence community” when he would not be able to control most of the intelligence apparatus.

Also, it cannot be said with certainty that the existence of coordinating mechanisms would have prevented the events of September 11, which was essentially an unexpected one. One analyst has referred to such an unexpected event as the ‘black swan’ problem – “an event that lies beyond the realm of normal expectations.” Since most people expect all swans to be white, “a black swan is by definition a surprise.”²⁸ An episode from the Cold War provides an illustrative example in this regard. From the time the CIA was established in 1947, its specific task was to prevent another surprise attack like Pearl Harbour. The first question invariably posed to defectors and spies during the first decade of the Cold War was whether they were aware of any imminent threat or planned attack. In the first half of 1961, none of the defectors were asked or volunteered to comment upon the huge stockpiles of building materials being accumulated by the Soviets in their zone of Berlin. As a result, the building of the Berlin Wall in the summer of 1961 came as a complete surprise. This led the CIA to subsequently ask every defector whether there was any unusual activity that may not appear to be threatening at first glance.²⁹ Yet, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and later that of Afghanistan in 1979 took the Agency by surprise as did the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the 1991 coup in the Soviet Union.

While the 9/11 Commission has focused on the systemic failure of the intelligence apparatus, it has neglected other factors like the skill and ingenuity of the terrorists and the difficulty of defending against suicide attacks or protecting a vast number of potential targets. It is true that the 9/11 attacks were imaginable and imagined, as the Commission points out by citing warnings and information about the possibility of the Al Qaida hijacking planes, filling them with explosives and crashing them

into US cities. But the fact remains, as the Director of the Department of Defense's Threat Reduction Agency stated a few months before September 11, "[w]e have, in fact, solved a terrorist problem in the last 25 years. We have solved it so successfully that we have forgotten about it... The problem was aircraft hijacking and bombing."³⁰

Fertile Imagination: Iraq's Non-Existent Weapons of Mass Destruction

In a January 26, 1998 letter to President Clinton, several leading members of the first Bush Administration, including Richard Armitage, John Bolton, Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz, argued that the then American policy towards Iraq – containment, sanctions and inspections to defang Saddam's WMD capabilities – was not working. In their view, Saddam's acquisition of WMD would constitute a threat to US troops in the region, to Israel, to moderate Arab states allied with the United States, and to a significant portion of the world's energy supplies. They urged Clinton to frame and implement a new policy, the centrepiece of which should be the removal of Saddam Hussein from power. They insisted that the United States has the authority under then existing UN resolutions to take military steps and that "American policy cannot continue to be crippled by a misguided insistence on unanimity in the UN Security Council."³¹

Confirmation that effecting regime change in Baghdad would be one of the Bush Administration's foreign policy priorities came when Condoleezza Rice (Bush's foreign policy adviser during the election campaign) declared that Saddam is "determined to develop WMD", that "nothing will change until Saddam is gone" and that the United States "must mobilize whatever resources it can, including support from his opposition, to remove him."³² True to form, at the very first meeting of the Bush Administration's senior national security team on January 30, 2001, Rice led off a discussion by stating that "Iraq might be the key to reshaping the entire region." According to former Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill, within minutes the discussion switched towards which targets to bomb in Iraq.³³

From the moment he heard about the September 11 attacks, Rumsfeld seems to have decided to use it as a pretext for war against Iraq. At 2:40 pm that day, an aide who was jotting down notes of the Defence Secretary's conversations wrote: "best info fast; judge whether good enough hit S.H. at same time. Not only U.B.L."³⁴ Rumsfeld formally raised the issue of attacking Iraq on September 12 and again, along with Wolfowitz on September 15, 2001.³⁵ President Bush also seems to have thought along similar lines, especially given his antipathy towards Saddam Hussein who had "tried to kill" his "dad".³⁶ On September 12, 2001, he

insisted that Richard Clarke and his staff “go back over everything... and see if Saddam did this. See if he’s linked in any way... I want to know any shred.”³⁷ Notwithstanding the absence of evidence in this regard, he tasked Rumsfeld on November 21, 2001, to begin devising military plans for removing Saddam Hussein. War planning began even as the Afghan operations were winding down, and Bush and his cabinet were kept constantly briefed about the progress of these plans. Soon, US forces in the Middle East began to be quietly increased.³⁸

Within hours of the September 11 attacks, a concerted effort began to establish a link between Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden and the Al Qaida. A new intelligence unit – the Policy Counter-terrorism Evaluation Group – was established in the office of Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Douglas Feith. When it first presented its findings at the CIA on August 15, 2002, it could not convince Agency officials. Regardless, Feith went ahead and provided the same briefing at the White House for senior NSC officials and at the Vice-President’s office. The top-down pressure worked wonderfully. On October 7, 2002, CIA Deputy Director John McLaughlin wrote to the Senate Intelligence Committee that there was, “solid evidence of senior level contacts between Iraq and al-Qa’ida [sic] going back a decade... Growing indications of a relationship with al-Qa’ida, [sic] suggest that Baghdad’s link to terrorists will increase, even absent US military action.”³⁹

9/11, the fear of a future terrorist attack using WMD and paranoia that rogue states could provide such capabilities to terrorist groups combined to provide the rationale for removing Saddam. The Bush Administration’s refrain was: “[w]e don’t want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud.”⁴⁰ After the Iraq War, Paul Wolfowitz confirmed in an interview that this rationale was chosen for “bureaucratic” reasons. What Wolfowitz implied – in Hans Blix’s view – is that “while there were many other reasons, this was the only rationale that could rally broad support in US public opinion and that stood a chance at having appeal outside the US and inside the United Nations.”⁴¹ And it did not matter whether Iraq complied or not with UN resolutions on its WMD programme. Vice-President Cheney had insisted that UN Security Council Resolution 1441 contain language that would make it obligatory upon Saddam to submit a detailed ‘declaration’ fully accounting for all his WMD programmes. This was designed to be “more or less as a trap”. If Saddam claimed that he did not have any WMD, “that lie would be grounds for war.” Alternately, if Saddam confessed to having WMD, then it would prove that he had lied for the previous 12 years. Cheney framed the issue thus: “That would be sufficient cause to say he’s lied again, he’s not come clean and you’d find material breach and away you’d go.”⁴²

In addition, the CIA acknowledged in a January 20, 2004, letter to Senator Carl Levin that it did not provide the United Nations information about 21 of the 105 Iraqi sites that it had singled out as most likely to house illicit weapons. Senator Levin believes that this was done in order to persuade the American people that the UN hunt for WMD in Iraq had run its full course before the war.⁴³ Be that as it may, even at those sites identified by intelligence agencies as the best places for possible inspection, the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission for Iraq (UNMOVIC) did not find any “prohibited activity.” A puzzled Hans Blix subsequently asked: “If this was the best, what was the rest? ... But could there be 100-percent certainty about the existence of Weapons of Mass Destruction but zero-percent knowledge about their location?”⁴⁴

It is true that there was an element of doubt about Iraq’s continued possession of WMD. And it flowed from Iraq’s refusal to fully cooperate with, and later even allow, inspectors of the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM). Iraq had also refused to allow inspections by UNMOVIC till the United States began to turn the heat on. Baghdad agreed to the resumption of inspections only after Bush had challenged the United Nations in September 2002 to prove its relevance by taking action against Iraq.⁴⁵ Doubts about Iraq’s continued possession of WMD – despite “a great deal of disarmament” – were “recognised” by the UN Security Council when it established UNMOVIC through Resolution 1284 in December 1999. Moreover, the intent behind UNSC Resolution 1441, passed in November 2002 to resume inspections, was to “resolve key remaining tasks in the disarming of Iraq.”⁴⁶

However, the US simply refused to wait till inspectors completed their task and reported their conclusion that there were no WMD stockpiles in Iraq. In his February 14, 2003 statement to the UNSC, Blix reported that inspectors had not found any WMD and that “there were no smoking guns to report.” He added that though many prohibited weapons and items have not yet been accounted for, it should not be construed to mean that these existed. For his part, IAEA Director-General Mohamed ElBaradei concluded on the same occasion that while some technical questions remained, there were “no unresolved disarmament issues” and no evidence of ongoing nuclear or nuclear-related activities. Again on March 6, 2003, ElBaradei reported that there was no evidence or indication of a revival of Iraq’s nuclear weapons programme.⁴⁷

In its efforts to convince the world about Iraqi deceit, the US came up with several pieces of intelligence that later turned out to be false or insignificant. For example, US allegations about Iraq contracting to buy natural uranium from Niger

proved to be a fabrication, though it has not been possible to identify the fabricators.⁴⁸ US information that the al-Samoud missiles exceeded the permitted range was true; but the excess range turned out to be only 30 kilometres. Subsequently, with Iraq's full cooperation, UNMOVIC supervised the destruction of some 70 of these missiles. Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), about which the US expressed grave fears, turned out to be powered by a two-stroke motorcycle engine with wings made of balsa wood and held together with duct tape. Its ground-control range was 8 kilometres and it could carry a payload of 20 kilograms only.⁴⁹

The key aspect in the American case for war was intelligence on Iraq's WMD programme. There is no doubt now that the intelligence estimates put out by both the United States and the United Kingdom in 2002 were intended to demonstrate the case for war. While it is true that the CIA ethic is to "call them as they see them," it is also a fact that the Agency works for the White House, and that its Director serves at the pleasure of the President. What the CIA says and does "will shape itself over time to what the president wants. When presidents don't like what they are being told they ignore it. When they want something done they press until it happens."⁵⁰ A good example of this in the case of Iraq occurred at a January 2003 staff meeting of the CIA's Weapons Intelligence, Nonproliferation and Arms Control Center, when the following instruction was issued: "If Bush wants to go to war, it's your job to give him a reason to do so."⁵¹

In the case of Iraq, this did not apply only to the CIA but extended to Secretary of State Colin Powell as well. It was because of Powell's insistence that Bush had decided to go to the United Nations in the first place, which resulted in Resolution 1441. But given the combination of the inability of UNMOVIC and IAEA inspectors to find any trace of WMD, the limited time available to finish the war before the onset of Summer, and Tony Blair's insistence on another resolution that explicitly authorised the use of force, Powell was convinced to deliver his February 5, 2003, speech at the United Nations as a means to obtain support for a second Security Council resolution. Powell carefully chose the evidence he presented – decontamination trucks, mobile bioweapon laboratories, an al-Samoud missile factory, aluminium tubes for centrifuge construction – and insisted that they added up to "facts and conclusions based on solid intelligence" and not "assertions."⁵² We now know that all these were just unfounded allegations.

All the above intelligence data were follow-ups to the October 2002 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iraq's WMD. Here, an episode from the Kennedy Administration provides an illustrative example of the uses to which NIEs have

been put to in earlier years. At a meeting to discuss the planned Bay of Pigs invasion, Richard Goodwin, then a young White House Assistant to President Kennedy, heard Richard Bissell confidently assert that the Cuban people would rise up against Fidel Castro once the rebels established themselves. When Goodwin asked as to what made him so confident in this assertion, Bissell “calmly turned to the General beside him and said, rather casually, ‘[w]e have an NIE on that, don’t we?’ In fact, no such intelligence estimate existed.” Bissell was merely interested in using intelligence data to obtain presidential approval.⁵³ Of course, in the case of Iraq, the purpose of the NIE was to obtain domestic and international approval and support for war.

The October 2002 NIE categorically asserted that Iraq has continued its WMD programmes; that it has “chemical and biological weapons as well as missiles with ranges in excess of UN restrictions”; and that if it is not checked, “it probably will have a nuclear weapon during this decade.”⁵⁴ An interesting aspect that has been brought to light by a Carnegie Endowment study is the difference in the language between the original classified NIE and the unclassified version that was released a week before the US Congress voted on the Iraq War resolution. For example, the words ‘we judge’ and ‘we assess’ were deleted from five key findings of the classified version. While the classified version read “[w]e judge that Iraq has continued its WMD programs,” the unclassified version asserted that “Iraq has continued its WMD programs.” Similarly, the classified document cautiously stated that “[w]e judge Iraq has some lethal and incapacitating BW agents,” while the unclassified estimate bluntly reported that “Iraq has some lethal and incapacitating BW agents.” Regarding chemical weapons, the classified version read “[w]e assess that Baghdad has begun renewed production of mustard, sarin, GF (cylcosarin) and VX,” whereas the unclassified version declared that “Baghdad has begun renewed production of chemical warfare agents.” To state the obvious, “uncertainties turned into fact.”⁵⁵

There was also a pronounced change in the tone of intelligence estimates made before and after mid-2002, with the former being generally cautious and the latter more alarmist.⁵⁶ It is indeed surprising that intelligence analysts and Bush Administration officials did not even pay heed to contrary views expressed by the US Energy Department that the aluminium tubes Iraq had sought were unfit for use in centrifuges as claimed by cabinet officials.⁵⁷ Similarly, in the case of Iraq’s UAVs, the US Air Force Intelligence had asserted that these would only serve reconnaissance purposes and could not be used for delivering biological agents. And the US Defense Intelligence Agency had insisted that there is lack of reliable information on production and stockpiling of chemical weapons. Where there was

disagreement between different agencies on assessment, the unclassified version blandly stated 'most analysts assess' or 'most analysts believe' without mentioning why some analysts disagreed.⁵⁸

It is thus clearly evident that intelligence did not fail, but merely tried to serve administration policy. As noted earlier, top-down pressure from the administration had forced the CIA to alter its views on the link between Saddam Hussein and the Al Qaida. Commentators and officials with access to information have provided proof in this regard. For example, Kenneth Pollack, a Clinton Administration national security official, a strong proponent of the Iraq War who had interacted with intelligence officials in the months leading up to March 2003, has brought out that Bush Administration officials displayed aggressive and negative reactions when presented with information that contradicted their beliefs. In addition, their requests for more information and questions about the credibility of sources went beyond responsible oversight and actually constituted a form of pressure on intelligence analysts.⁵⁹ This has been further substantiated by the report of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, which had investigated the pre-war intelligence assessment relating to Iraq's WMD programmes. In her testimony before the Committee, Jamie Miscik, the CIA's Director of Intelligence, admitted to numerous interactions between intelligence analysts and policy-makers and stated that the latter repeatedly came back to certain points or issues. She also conceded that if an analyst is pressed to repeatedly go over some point about, say Iraq's nuclear weapons programme, (s)he "might be able to say or might think of that as some sort of, if not pressure, then some sort of a reluctance to accept the answer" the policy-makers were given.⁶⁰

Conclusion

Intelligence assessment and policy-making interact and influence each other. Ideally, growing intelligence data about a particular threat or phenomenon should help governments in reorienting their policies. At the same time, government policy provides a sense of direction and purpose to intelligence agencies. The principal problem facing the US throughout the 1990s was the absence of a concrete threat from a well-defined and identifiable adversary and the concentration of mind that this brings about. This problem was compounded by US involvement in a series of regional crises that led to sudden and frequent shifts in focus and targets. Under the circumstances, no amount of threat reporting could force decision-makers to change policy. Only a catastrophe of the magnitude of September 11 could subject a rethink. In contrast, intelligence assessment with respect to Iraq's WMD was

driven by a single-minded approach of the policy-makers, who were determined to overthrow Saddam Hussein and establish a democratic Iraq as a counter-example to the vision projected by militant Islamists. The Bush Administration chose the WMD issue for this purpose, and the intelligence agencies duly provided the necessary ammunition. What clearly emerges from these two cases is the blinkered role played by decision-makers in first failing to act upon a growing threat from the Al Qaida and subsequently conjuring up a non-existent stockpile of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

Acknowledgement

This article is based on a presentation titled “Political Context and Intelligence Assessment” delivered at an IDSA Round Table, *9/11 Revisited*, held at the India International Centre, New Delhi, on September 6, 2004. The author thanks K. Subrahmanyam who provided valuable comments on that occasion and subsequently as well.

References/End Notes

- ¹ Lawrence Freedman, “The Third World War?” *Survival*, 43 (4), Winter 2001-02, pp. 61-88; Phil McCombs, “The Fire This Time: To Some Scholars, Iraq’s Just Part of Something Bigger”, *The Washington Post* (Internet Edition), April 13, 2003.
- ² Bernard Lewis, “The Roots of Muslim Rage: Why so many Muslims deeply resent the West, and why their bitterness will not be easily mollified”, *Atlantic Monthly*, 266 (3), September 1990, pp. 47-60; electronic copy accessed on March 18, 2005, at http://www.cis.org.au/policy/summer01-02/PolicySymmer01_3.html; Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs*, 72 (3), Summer 1993, pp. 22-49; *idem*, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1996; for responses to Huntington’s formulation, see *Foreign Affairs*, 72 (4), September/October 1993, pp. 2-26; for the argument on bunk mentality, see the review of Huntington’s book by William McNeill, “The Decline of the West,” *The New York Review of Books*, January 9, 1997, pp. 18-22.
- ³ Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Osama bin Laden from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*, New York, The Penguin Press, 2004, p. 10.
- ⁴ Cited in Bernard Lewis, “License to Kill”, *Foreign Affairs*, 77 (6), November/December 1998, p. 15.
- ⁵ Steve Coll, no. 3, pp. 222-3, 322-6; the quotation is on page 326.
- ⁶ The impact of the massacre at Qana on Osama bin Laden has been brought out by

James Bamford, *A Pretext for War: 9/11, Iraq, and the Abuse of America's Intelligence Agencies*, New York, Doubleday, 2004, p. 144.

- ⁷ On Alex station, see Steve Coll, no. 3, pp. 319-20; for details on Yousef's plot to blow up American airliners, see James Bamford, no. 6, pp. 133-8.
- ⁸ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, "Executive Summary", *The 9/11 Commission Report*, at www.gpoaccess.gov/911/ (accessed on August 30, 2004), pp. 2, 12; for an account of US policy and attempts to get Osama bin Laden, see Steve Coll, no. 3, chapters 21, 23, 24, 28.
- ⁹ Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, "A Failure of Intelligence?" *The New York Review of Books*, December 20, 2001, p. 78.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 76.
- ¹¹ Reference to the Egyptian agent is made by Steve Coll, no. 3, p. 411; for the CIA withdrawing its intelligence reports on Sudan, see James Bamford, no. 6, p. 210.
- ¹² "Executive Summary", *The 9/11 Commission Report*, no. 8, p. 12.
- ¹³ For two illustrative instances of this Clinton Administration approach, see Steve Coll, no. 3, pp. 385-6, 429-30.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 502, 435, 451-2.
- ¹⁵ Richard Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror*, New York, Free Press, 2004, p. 31.
- ¹⁶ See, for example, Condoleezza Rice, "Promoting the National Interest", *Foreign Affairs*, 79 (1), January/February 2000, pp. 45-62.
- ¹⁷ Transcript of the talk cited in James Bamford, no. 6, p. 284.
- ¹⁸ Richard Clarke, no. 15, pp. 231-2.
- ¹⁹ "Executive Summary", *The 9/11 Commission Report*, no. 8, p. 9.
- ²⁰ For a detailed narrative about how the CIA lost their trail, see James Bamford, no. 6, pp. 221-30.
- ²¹ "Executive Summary", *The 9/11 Commission Report*, no. 8, pp. 6-8.
- ²² Excerpts of the PDB are reprinted in James Bamford, no. 6, pp. 242-4.
- ²³ "Executive Summary", *The 9/11 Commission Report*, no. 8, pp. 8-11.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-4.
- ²⁵ Michael A. Fletcher and Walter Pincus, "Negroponte Named National Intelligence Chief: Ambassador to Iraq would Oversee Nation's 15 Spy Agencies", *The Washington Post* (Internet Edition), February 18, 2005; Dan Eggen, "Bush Gives CIA Director More Power", *The Washington Post* (Internet Edition), August 28, 2004.
- ²⁶ Richard A. Posner, "The 9/11 Report: A Dissent", *The New York Times Book Review* (Internet Edition), August 29, 2004.
- ²⁷ David Ignatius, "A Czar's Uncertain Clout", *The Washington Post* (Internet Edition),

March 4, 2005.

- ²⁸ Nassim Nicholas Taleb, “Learning to Expect the Unexpected”, *The New York Times* (Internet Edition), April 8, 2004.
- ²⁹ Thomas Powers, “How Bush Got It Wrong”, *The New York Review of Books*, September 23, 2004, p. 91.
- ³⁰ Cited in Richard A. Posner, no. 26.
- ³¹ The text of the letter can be found at www.newamericancentury.org/iraqlintonletter.htm (accessed on February 5, 2004).
- ³² Condoleezza Rice, no. 16, p. 60.
- ³³ James Bamford, no. 6, p. 267.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 285.
- ³⁵ Bob Woodward, *Bush At War*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2002, pp. 49-83.
- ³⁶ Cited in James Bamford, no. 6, p. 255.
- ³⁷ Richard Clarke, no. 15, p. 32.
- ³⁸ Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2004, *passim*; the reference to Bush tasking Rumsfeld is on page 1.
- ³⁹ James Bamford, no. 6, pp. 288-9, 317-8.
- ⁴⁰ Condoleezza Rice’s statement on CNN. Cited in Bob Woodward, no. 38, p. 179.
- ⁴¹ Hans Blix, *Disarming Iraq*, New York, Pantheon Books, 2004, p. 266.
- ⁴² Bob Woodward, no. 38, p. 222.
- ⁴³ Douglas Jehl and David E. Sanger, “CIA Admits It Didn’t Give Weapons Data to the UN”, *The New York Times* (Internet Edition), February 21, 2004.
- ⁴⁴ Hans Blix, no. 41, p. 156.
- ⁴⁵ For a transcript of Bush’s September 12, 2002, Remarks at the United Nations General Assembly, see <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/09/20020912-1.html> (accessed on February 17, 2005). Iraq conveyed its decision to allow the return of UN weapons inspectors to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan on September 16, 2002. See Hans Blix, no. 41, p. 74.
- ⁴⁶ Hans Blix, no. 41, p. 3.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 176-8, 210.
- ⁴⁸ For details, see James Bamford, no. 6, pp. 298-307.
- ⁴⁹ On the al-Samoud missiles and UAVs, see Hans Blix, no. 41, pp. 190, 227.
- ⁵⁰ Thomas Powers, “The Failure”, *The New York Review of Books*, April 29, 2004, p. 4.
- ⁵¹ James Bamford, no. 6, pp. 333-4.
- ⁵² Colin Powell’s February 5, 2003, speech at the UNSC at www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2003/17300.htm (accessed on September 1, 2004).
- ⁵³ Richard Goodwin, “Making the Facts Fit the Case for War”, *The New York Times*

(Internet Edition), February 8, 2004.

- ⁵⁴ Leaked excerpts of the October 2002 NIE at www.fas.org/irp/congress/2003_cr/h072103.html (accessed on September 1, 2004).
- ⁵⁵ Jessica Mathews and Jeff Miller, "A Tale of Two Intelligence Estimates", March 2004 at www.ceip.org (accessed on September 2, 2004).
- ⁵⁶ See the Carnegie Endowment website for four different tables (one each for nuclear, chemical, biological weapons and one for missile delivery systems) which summarise the intelligence estimates arrived at before October 2002, the October 2002 estimate, UN findings, statements by the Bush Administration, and evidence since March 2003. www.ceip.org (accessed on September 2, 2004).
- ⁵⁷ For an overview of this issue, see David Barstow, William J. Broad and Jeff Gerth, "How the White House Embraced Disputed Arms Intelligence", *The New York Times* (Internet Edition), October 3, 2004.
- ⁵⁸ See Jessica Mathews and Jeff Miller, no. 55; also see editorial, "Intelligence on the Eve of the War", *The New York Times* (Internet Edition), February 1, 2004.
- ⁵⁹ Editorial, "Intelligence on the Eve of War", *The New York Times*, Ibid.
- ⁶⁰ Cited in Thomas Powers, no. 29, p. 88.

Dr S Kalyanaraman is Associate Fellow at IDSA. His research interests centre on issues of war and peace in the international system.