

November 18, 2007

Artificial Intelligence

By CHRISTOPHER DICKEY

IN the last months before the American-led invasion of Iraq, as we now know all too well, the administration of President [George W. Bush](#) showed a fine disregard for truth or consequences. This manifested itself in many ways, from insinuations about [Saddam Hussein](#)'s ephemeral Qaeda connections to the Pentagon's willful refusal to address the human and economic costs of occupation. Bookstore shelves now groan with wide-ranging accounts struggling to chronicle the pathological hubris that drove the United States onward to Baghdad.

The Los Angeles Times national security correspondent Bob Drogin has taken a more focused approach. In "Curveball: Spies, Lies, and the Con Man Who Caused a War," he concentrates on a central question: How was it, precisely, that the administration convinced itself and the American public that there was proof Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction? Of course the hawks pushing for invasion believed this almost as a matter of faith, but their theology wasn't going to be enough to mobilize hundreds of thousands of soldiers and hundreds of billions of dollars. So the W.M.D. threat became the most important of the many reasons given for going to war: "Simply stated," as Vice President [Dick Cheney](#) put it, "there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction." This is a story of willful blindness masquerading as secret intelligence that is worthy of Somerset Maugham or [Graham Greene](#), and Drogin rises to the occasion.

His narrative of bureaucracy and treachery weaves the stories of Cheney; Bush; [George Tenet](#), then the director of central intelligence; and assorted spies around a shadowy character who lurks golem-like at the middle of the intelligence swamp: an Iraqi asylum-seeker in Germany who said he had firsthand knowledge of Hussein's biological weapons program and offered copious details to support his claims.

The man in question was often described in public pronouncements as "the defector." When [Colin Powell](#), then the secretary of state, presented the case for war to the [United Nations](#) in February 2003, he called him "an eyewitness, an Iraqi chemical engineer who supervised" one of the biological weapons sites. According to Powell, the defector "actually was present during the biological agent production runs. He was also at the site when an accident occurred in 1998. Twelve technicians died from exposure to biological agents." Having suggested this amazing source was one of those "who have risked their lives to let the world know what Saddam Hussein is really up to," Powell now told the hushed [United Nations Security Council](#), and the world, "This defector is currently hiding in another country with the certain knowledge that

CURVEBALL

Spies, Lies, and the Con Man Who Caused a War.

By Bob Drogin.

343 pp. Random House. \$26.95.

Saddam Hussein will kill him if he finds him.”

A better word for the defector, in fact, was “fabricator.” With marvelous chutzpah, the source had made it all up. He had landed in Munich in November 1999 looking for asylum and wound up in the grim Zirndorf holding center. He wanted an immigrant visa and money. So, drawing on bits and pieces of his personal experience and a lot of reading on the Internet, he persuaded the German Federal Intelligence Service that he had information it coveted. The United States [Defense Intelligence Agency](#), which got summaries of the German reports but no transcripts, code-named the source “Curve Ball.” The Germans warned the Americans he might be unreliable but would not let any American intelligence officer interview him. After 9/11, as the Bush administration focused its “war on terror” against Saddam Hussein as well as [Osama bin Laden](#), and despite all the warning signals, the [Central Intelligence Agency](#) bought into Curveball sight unseen. Its experts in weapons of mass destruction endorsed his deception as truth. The skeptics within the agency were ignored.

How could this be? Today, the Bush administration’s conviction that Hussein had W.M.D. seems grimly risible. But that wasn’t the case in 2001. Hussein had had an arsenal of poisonous gases and used them in his wars against Iran and the Kurds in the 1980s. During the same period, he had developed a sophisticated nuclear program that might eventually have produced a bomb. He had experimented extensively with biological weapons. Yes, Hussein’s defeat in 1991 by the American-led coalition in Operation Desert Storm forced him to open up to United Nations weapons inspection teams, and they eventually searched out and destroyed just about every bit of W.M.D. in Iraq. But in 1998 the inspectors withdrew so the Americans could lead a brief but extensive air assault on the regime, and then, when those bombings failed to achieve their goals, the inspectors were not allowed to return.

“Their departure was a disaster for the C.I.A.,” Drogin writes. “The agency had infiltrated spies into the U.N. teams, and the inspectors became the C.I.A.’s eyes and ears in Iraq. Now they might as well scribble the Latin *hic sunt dracones* on the map: here be dragons. The Americans had failed to recruit a single Iraqi agent, not one, who was close to Saddam’s illicit weapons programs.”

Intelligence analysts assumed Hussein had reconstituted at least part of his programs, but that was impossible to know for sure. When Curveball started talking to the Germans in 2000, he seemed to fill the void. His critical information: Iraq had developed laboratories mounted on trucks that could produce biological weapons like anthrax or botulinum toxin but would be almost impossible to detect. There had been rumors of such a project before. Curveball’s account was taken as confirmation they existed. It occurred to only a few C.I.A. officers that he had heard those rumors, too, and fitted them neatly into his fabrication. But their criticisms were dismissed.

The highest and lowest drama in Drogin’s book is the spectacle of administration evidence about Iraq’s weapons evanescent in the months before — and after — the invasion. The United Nations, responding to American pressure, forced Hussein to let inspectors return in late 2002, but they found there was nothing much to find, even at the sites Curveball had talked about. Secretary Powell clearly knew something was wrong as he prepared his speech to the United Nations just weeks before the war was due to begin. He threw out an incendiary and unverifiable draft prepared by Cheney’s office and did his best to force the C.I.A. to stand behind its information. (Indeed, Tenet was seated behind him at the United Nations.) The

unseen “mobile biological labs” concocted by Curveball came to seem “the most solid piece of intelligence,” said Powell’s chief of staff, Col. Lawrence Wilkerson.

In a real sense — and this is worth remembering as we listen to the drumbeat for military attacks against Iran today — doubts did not matter. The invasion of Iraq had been decided in 2002 and was going to happen in 2003 no matter what information came to the administration. “Under pressure to build the case for war,” Drogin writes, “the C.I.A. chiefs figured they’d get to Baghdad, find warehouses full of W.M.D., and no one would remember a bogus defector.” It turns out they were wrong about that too.

Christopher Dickey, the Paris bureau chief and Middle East editor for Newsweek, writes a weekly column on police work, espionage and counterterrorism for Newsweek.com.

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