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Interview Carl Ford



[What was it like coming over from the CIA to work with the Pentagon policy-makers in 1991?]

Well, it's clear that they have little respect or confidence in what the intelligence community produces. And to be fair, they are right. The intelligence community doesn't do a very good job. It was an interesting assignment, because I could see what policy-makers really needed, what we weren't doing for them. I found it to be and extremely interesting and valuable time. Plus, I enjoyed working for [then-Secretary of Defense Dick] Cheney and [then-Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Paul] Wolfowitz and Harry Rowen, my first assistant secretary [of defense].

A 40-year veteran of U.S. intelligence work, Carl Ford worked on intelligence in the Pentagon under then-Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney during the first Gulf War (1991) and later was in charge of the State Department's Intelligence and Research Bureau (INR) from 2001-2003. In this interview, he talks about Cheney's management style as defense secretary and what it was like to work for him. Ford also discusses how the U.S. intelligence system came to be broken, how it failed in its analysis of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, and why he and the INR were skeptical about intelligence that said aluminum pipes purchased by Iraq could be used to make nuclear centrifuges. This is an edited transcript of an interview conducted on Jan. 10, 2006.

Some highlights from this interview

[What went wrong in the analysis of Iraq's alleged purchase of yellowcake uranium](#)

[The Tenet-Bush relationship](#)

[How flawed intelligence became part of Colin Powell's U.N. speech](#)

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Help me understand that Defense Department under Secretary Cheney back in the early 1990s. What was Cheney like?

Cheney was very, very smart, very interested in his job. He was organized in a way that made it easier for the people that worked for him to do the job. I can remember early on a session with Cheney. I was a principal deputy. I was three or four levels down from him, but I had a conversation with him in which he explained that in areas that I was responsible for, there were these certain set of issues that he was extremely interested in.

He was basically saying: "These issues -- I don't want you to do anything without talking to me first. If anything happens, let me know about it. These are things that any time of day, any time of night, let me know." Then he went through another series of issues, and he said: "These are ones that are very important, and here is the way I would like you to move on these. If there is a problem, come back to me. Don't freelance on this."

We are talking now probably 10 or 12 issues that he had talked about. He then said, "And the rest of them, just don't get me in trouble." So I knew exactly what I was supposed to do, what my priorities should be, how far I could go, how far I should [go], how many risks I could take.

It didn't stop there, because he would also make sure that I, along with all the other people, knew what was going on, so that he would go over to the White House and have a meeting with the president --

Most bureaucracies, when the secretary comes back trying to find out what happened, even for an undersecretary [it] is sometimes very difficult. So he would come back, and he would debrief his military assistant: "Here is what happened. And tell Carl these two things. Tell John those four things," whatever it was. We

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would know that these were the issues that we should be aware of. This is where the president was; this is where Cheney was.

We found that invaluable, because we would go over to State or to the NSC [National Security Council]; we would find out that we actually knew more of what was going on in the government and where our bosses were than they did.

... Give me the state of play of the Central Intelligence Agency at the end of the Cold War, just as you join [George H.W.] Bush's administration. ...

Well, you are asking somebody who has been in the intelligence community for a long time, who has been an observer of that community with an eye to try to make it better. I'm also the sort of person that has never, never in my life seen a glass half full; it is always half empty. So when you ask me about CIA, you are not going to get all the good things that they have done, but ... how much better they could have done.

The reason I make that point is that I think that the intelligence community today and even at the end of the Cold War and the Gulf War was already deeply in decline. The rot and problems had already begun to manifest themselves, and they only got worse after that. ... There were already serious problems in the intelligence community. At least the professionals were talking about it.

Can you tick those off for me?

... Let me start with what analysts do, and the best way to do that is to talk about what policy-makers do. Policy-makers make choices and fix problems. Intelligence officers, particularly intelligence analysts, help policy-makers understand better the challenges and problems they face. They are there to create new knowledge, fill in gaps. They provide policy-makers with more and better information.

What you are normally talking about is more like a picture puzzle, and ... the intelligence officers are, in fact, trying to find as many pieces as they can and put them in there so they can make a better guess and say to the policy-makers, "I think this is what is happening." Well, that process is essentially a guessing game. I wish it weren't so. Policy-makers don't want it to be [a guessing game]. They want perfect knowledge. They want you to be certain. But the fact is that any intelligence officer worth their salt knows that they are guessing, that they are providing them with as much knowledge as they can. But it is still a limited amount of the puzzle; it is not the whole puzzle.

Because of these pressures by the policy-makers to do better, ... I think that we got into the bad habit of believing that our job was primarily to collect information and give that information to the policy-makers. It became a news distribution process. We became *The New York Times* for ... the president. The only difference between us and *The New York Times* is we had clandestine and classified sources. We had SIGINT [signals intelligence], PHOTINT [photographic intelligence] and HUMINT [human intelligence], but we were covering the same subjects in about the same depth as the front page of *The New York Times*.

As important as that is, that is not all you do. ... If you stop with current news, you're going to have a process in which you can only provide the bare minimum of what policy-makers need. We've become a one-trick pony. ... We are the best collectors in the world, ... [but] the more difficult parts that you have to dig into the details a little bit more have gotten second, third shrift. ...

[Give me an example.] ...

[T]ake this Niger issue as a classic example ... of the one-trick pony. This began when a foreign intelligence service told us that they had some information coming out of Niger that suggested that they were selling yellowcake uranium -- raw uranium that will be processed into nuclear weapons material -- to Iraq. ...

Well, that was important news. Iraq is a pretty important country, and [if] anybody [is] making weapons [there], you want to hear about that. So naturally somebody reported that current news, and ... clearly they got to the attention of the vice president, which suggests that they were in the President's Daily Brief [PDB]. They got that high up. ... It appeared in the State of the Union, where it was made an issue.

"[T]he way we go about doing our jobs ... is broken. People in the intelligence community itself either don't know or have forgotten how to do real intelligence."



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It also was used in those statements when we went back and said to Saddam, "You haven't lived up to your agreements." ... So this is a pretty important issue.

To the best of my knowledge and to the best of the knowledge of the SSCI [Senate Select Committee on Intelligence] from their [study](#) [Note: PDF document; Adobe Acrobat required], nobody ever bothered to check it out. They reported it, but nobody went further and said, "Well, let me look at those documents." There were people that disagreed with the reporting, people in my office, for example. But nobody, my own office included, said, "Well, if I disagree, let's look at those documents more carefully and see what they say." ...

Now, those documents weren't even translated until after the State of the Union. And they weren't translated and widely disseminated until the IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] actually did it themselves. I'm told that they did it within a matter of days -- that was a year after the fact that they should have been looked at. That was a year after we had made this an issue and brought it up to the president of the United States and the vice president and said, "You ought to know about this." ...

And made it a cause of war.

That's right. The fact is that even if the documents hadn't been bogus, this was an easy one: All they had to do was translate the documents. And as soon as they [translated them] a year later, everyone said, "Oh, well, they are bogus." ...

Somebody in the analytical community should have said: "If they are giving the Iraqis 500 tons of yellowcake, what questions do I need to ask? What information do I need to prove that one way or another?" This is not North Korea; this isn't the Soviet Union. This is Niger. This is a country in Africa that has a strong French influence. The uranium mine is owned by the French. As an analyst I would say, if they sold 500 tons of yellowcake, there is going to be paperwork in that plant suggesting that there is 500 tons that they can't account for or that looks funny, and I want to see where it went. ... Go check. I mean, you can do that. You could ask the French to check for you, Or you could ask the CIA, "Go in there and look through this stuff."

Well, isn't that what [Ambassador] Joe Wilson went to do?

Joe Wilson is not a CIA clandestine officer. He can only go in and say: "Mr. Former Prime Minister, have you guys been doing some bad things with the Iraqis? Have you been [dealing] some yellowcake?" If they had said yes or no, as an analyst, I wouldn't have believed it. The question is, what happened to the yellowcake in Niger? We still don't know.

We know those documents are bogus. We don't know the answer to the question, "How many tons did they produce, and where did it go?" It seems to me, given the fact that it was in the State of the Union speech as a reason to go to war, the National Intelligence Estimate [NIE], somebody in the intelligence community ought to have found out by 2006 exactly where every ton of yellowcake from the Niger uranium mine is and how it got there.

[But we know that the documents reporting the transfer are bogus?]

Well, it could be. We know the documents are bogus. ... [Maybe] the story is true, but the documents are false.

The office of the vice president and the Department of Defense, [in response] to Wilson's criticism, [didn't ask] the CIA to go over and find out?

No. No. No. Remember, the vice president asked the intelligence community, "What's this about this report?" They were the ones that thought up the idea of sending Wilson. They are the ones that came up with the plan to confirm or not confirm these documents. They were the ones that did or didn't translate documents.

The vice president, who has got a lot of things on his plate, ... he said: "This is important. This is interesting to me. Tell me about it." He didn't [say], "Prove to me that Saddam is up to bad things." He said: "I think Saddam is up to bad things. This looks like a piece of evidence in that case. Is this true?"

I guarantee you that I don't care what anybody says about Vice President Cheney: If it wasn't true, he wanted to know that. And asking the question should have given the intelligence community their marching orders.

So why didn't they do it?

Because they don't know how to do it. All they know how to do is report the news, and they have forgotten how to do the other stuff. They collect information. They don't respond to problem sets; they don't ask questions. I mean, to do this you had to say not "What is coming in on Niger?" but "What do we need to know about Niger in order to answer this question?"

In some cases we say, "It is going to be too expensive, and it's not important enough for us to spend our time and resources. We will just make a guess at it." But ... this was one of those critical issues that if you were ever going to do anything to get to the bottom of it, analytically and otherwise, that you would have said: "Well, let's find out about this one. Let's, all of sudden, do something unbureaucratic. Let's actually plan something unilaterally or with the French. Let's get to the bottom of this. Experts, please tell me what I need to know to be able to prove or disprove what's going on at this mine."

What you are saying is either a) they are incompetent, or there is a certain level of bureaucratic inertia at work here; or b) they intentionally were not going to get very much further because they were tooling their intelligence for the client. They had an idea that the client didn't want to know the real truth.

... I think competence is a major issue -- not competence in collection, not competence in reporting. I said we are good at that. We've got great people. We spend a lot of money, and what we do we do well. [But asking the critical questions?] We simply don't do this sort of thing anymore. People have forgotten how or they never knew. The people that they work for are basically editors and people who know how to put headlines on things. ...

That instinct to find out how to get to the truth rather than report what somebody else has told you was happening is the problem. We are reporters. We are no longer trying to answer questions and get to the bottom of some of these problems that policy-makers face. Policy-makers are starving to death for knowledge. It's not because we have given them too much; it's because we haven't given them enough.

[Does that explain why the vice president and the secretary of defense and others sought an alternative source of intelligence, from then-Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Doug Feith's Policy Counterterrorism Evaluation Group (PCTEG) and the Office of Special Plans (OSP) at the Pentagon, say?]

I think in part. I mean, shame on us in the intelligence community. You've got four or five guys in the Pentagon that can outwrite and outthink the CIA and DIA [Defense Intelligence Agency] and INR [State Department's Intelligence Research Bureau]. If we can't do better, we're in real deep trouble. ... We could have done far better and a more quality job than anything they ever did, and we could have won the intellectual argument simply by the power of our work and the quality of our work. We simply didn't compete. We were trying to tell them what we had just seen on photography or what we had just seen in a HUMINT report or what we had just [heard] in a telephone conversation. ...

When the yellowcake investigation is under way, ... what did you tell [then-Secretary of State Colin Powell]? How were you sifting that information?

We saw the original reports. We went to several of the interagency meetings where this issue was discussed. And indeed, [one of my analysts was] at the meeting in which it was discussed about sending Ambassador Wilson out to Niger. ... One of my analysts actually wrote a memo for the record that outlined what happened at that meeting. ...

What did it say?

... The opinion of our Africa and our nuclear analyst was, you've got to be kidding me. This is garbage; this doesn't make sense, and that even if it is true, it can't be right, all the details. We've got to find out more about this, but we don't think there is anything to it.

That was based on several factors. One, it just so happened that one of the Africa analysts had served in Niger and had an understanding of what this country was like and what the uranium mines were [like]. This analyst's position was, listen, 500 tons of yellowcake is a big deal at this plant, and that if it had occurred, it couldn't have been done without someone noticing; that it doesn't necessarily mean that it would have been associated with Iraq, but ... people would have reported and talked about it. ... There would have been some notice. The fact is there was no evidence other than this report that anything was going on at the mine.

So when the alarm bells go off inside INR, what happens?

... If we had been larger or we had been doing our job better, we would have gone the next step and said: "Well, prove it to me. Let us come up with some sort of better answer than we have now." We just simply thought it was so bad, so off the mark, that we didn't want to spend a lot of time on it. If you have a few people and you have all the problems of the world, and this is clearly a bad call, why waste a lot of time on it? ...

We footnoted [it in the 2002 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iraq], and we said, "We think this is garbage," and why we thought it was garbage. And no one stopped us. [Then-CIA Director] George Tenet didn't say: "Carl, you guys in INR are wrong. You can't put that in there." He encouraged us to say our piece. The secretary [Powell] knew that we had a disagreement. ...

What was the secretary's response at a moment like that?

... You have to keep in perspective that INR is a very small organization. I had less than 150 analysts to cover every problem in the world. Fortunately those are very bright people, ... but they can only do what they can do. ...

At the end of the day, you've got DIA, CIA, [the Department of] Energy, everybody, and they are all saying: "We are bigger. We're spending more money, and we think those guys in INR are flat wrong." What is the president, what is the vice president, what is Colin Powell, what is anybody going to say? Even if they know we are good, they are still going to say: "How could those people with all those resources and money, how could they be so wrong? Maybe they haven't got it exactly right, but I'm not sure I can buy INR's view either."

We were giving an opinion, not a lot evidence. One of the arguments that I make with analysts all the time is that if you are going to tell the president of the United States what you think, please show him why you think that. Don't just tell him, "I don't think this yellowcake story is true." Lay out for him or any other policy-maker the logic that you used to arrive at that decision, and let them be the judge that your evidence and your logic is sound. They will have much greater reason to believe you if they listen to that. ... And if you have that evidence, even the most skeptical can most often be persuaded, if not to change their mind, at least to be very nervous about their view.

[What was the relationship like between President Bush and Director Tenet?]

... One of the best things that George Tenet accomplished was the relationship he developed with the president. As an intelligence officer, if you don't develop a relationship and credibility with your primary consumer, what good are you? If you don't have access to tell them what the intelligence community believes, it doesn't matter whether you are right or wrong; they don't find out about it.

Now, did George have an influence on the president? I'm sure he did, because he had gotten access. He was providing the president with information from the intelligence community. ... Unfortunately for him, he got the access, but the crap he was giving him was not necessarily as good as it should have been.

Did Tenet know the intelligence was crap?

Best as I could tell, it wasn't that [he was] trying to give the president what he wanted to hear -- not in George's case, not in the senior intelligence group that I dealt with. ... They were honestly and sincerely trying to give them their best sense of what the intelligence community believed, and that judgment was wrong. The information that they provided them was, in many cases, not as good as I think it could have been, but that wasn't because they were weak or they were conniving. It was because they made some fundamental misjudgments about what the intelligence community could and couldn't do. They should have known better, but they didn't, apparently. ...

If you are a policy-maker and you don't believe [the information coming out] of the Central Intelligence Agency, do you then create the Office of Special Plans, the very small group of people that are over at the Pentagon?

I understand the instinct. The instinct is, "I'm not getting enough good information, and if they won't do it, maybe these guys can." I think that is the wrong way to approach it. My experience tells me that the problem can only be fixed when the policy-maker, the commander, demands that intelligence gets better. They can't just simply ignore us and say, "Well, that is as good as they can do," or, "I can't wait until they get better; I'm going to go on my own." They have to demand excellence.

But if the policy-maker doesn't demand quality, there is a tendency to give him easy stuff rather than take risks. ...

Of course, you are in the middle of an emergency, and the house is on fire, and you are not going to stop and say, "Let me build a new fire department."

[It] can't wait until we get better. The decision about what to do about Saddam, whether you agreed with it or not, needed to be made during that timeframe. Whether it was the right one, I don't know. The question is, what did the intelligence community do to help the president and the vice president and others make that very important decision? In my judgment as an intelligence officer, not very much. We did things so poorly that we are partly responsible for this mess.

[Help me understand how bad intelligence was used to show a connection between Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein and became the rationale for war. Take the report that Mohamed Atta, the ringleader of the 9/11 attacks, met with an Iraqi intelligence officer in Prague in 2000. The vice president said over and over again that he believed the meeting had actually taken place. How would a piece of that kind of information get started, get fostered, in that environment?]

The same way that Niger yellowcake reporting got reported and believed -- that is, that somebody reported about this meeting; people either believed it or they didn't. It became part of the wisdom of the intelligence community. Nobody checked it out. Nobody added it up and went back and said, "Well, what does that mean?" [Nobody] asked different questions and came up with some different sort of answers. ... Nobody, certainly [not] in the intelligence community, was providing any information to persuade either the hawks or the doves on that issue. ...

When you have very strong, opinionated people who believe something, you've got to work pretty hard to show them that you are right about Saddam. He's a bad guy, but in this instance, not in the way you think.

So you don't think the vice president is actually misrepresenting the facts when he goes on Tim Russert's show *Meet the Press* saying: "That meeting happened. We know things." ...

That's what the intelligence community told him, and that's all they have. The vice president was an expert on this issue. He had as much knowledge on that particular issue as any analyst in the community. ... The problem was that there were only four or five people. There is not a lot of work [that has] been done. There were little pieces picked up over time, and it was reported as news, and that's it. There is nobody going back and saying, "... Let's go back and check whether that's the true story or not." ...

And when it comes forward from people in Czechoslovakia ... [that] the story continues to get knocked down, why does the vice president continue to flog it?

Because if I tell you that one of your strongly held views is wrong, it's important for me to tell you why I think that. If I just say you're wrong, you are not going to believe me. ... They just simply were saying, "Well, I don't believe it." Nobody on either side of the argument was going back and saying: "There's got to be more of a story here. Let's find out more evidence about this and then go back and tell people about it, and then they can make up their minds for themselves whether it's true or not." ...

Would you do every meeting like that? No. But this was one that somebody, somewhere should have spent six months going over every angle and looking at it from a different perspective, looking at different data. ... By having more meat on the bones, you can convince even very strong, opinionated, knowledgeable people like the president, vice president and secretary of state. ... Nobody was giving them anything to challenge or to support their contention. They simply went on their instincts of what we had told them. ...

[But did you believe the reports were true, that there was a link between Al Qaeda and Iraq?]

It's complicated. Let me tell you what my view was, ... and it was different than my analysts'. My analysts were very skeptical from day one on that particular issue. And if the question was do I believe that Al Qaeda and Saddam were formally working together, I agreed with my analysts: There was not only no evidence, but there was strong evidence to show that that didn't make any sense. It wasn't a rational thing for either Saddam or Al Qaeda to do.

What I found more difficult to believe was that Al Qaeda could operate in Iraq in the way we knew they were operating both in Baghdad and in areas more distant from Baghdad without Saddam and his secret police and intelligence knowing that they were doing [it]. He could have stopped or restricted their activities. This is a dictatorship. You don't walk into Baghdad and move into a hotel and stay there for six months and the police don't know who you are and what you are doing there. So the fact is that there was a clear level of knowledge on the part of ... Saddam about Al Qaeda's activities in Iraq.

I have every reason to believe that he knew they were playing around with poisons and other things up in the Kurdish area. ... If we knew about it, I'd have to bet that Saddam knew. The issue wasn't that there wasn't a connection; it was that they didn't have anything to do with 9/11 and that they weren't in cahoots with them.

I do believe that there was, in fact, at the local level, some evidence of cooperation between local police and Al Qaeda that were operating in Iraq, not because they agreed [to do it] as part of a plan, but [because] they both agreed that we were bad guys, and here was a guy that was killing Americans. "He's actually [from] a different branch of the religion than I am, ... [but] that doesn't mean I [can't] sort of like this guy and buy him a beer or make it easier for him to operate in my town, because he is doing the right work. ... He kills Americans; he can't be all bad." So the notion that there was complete separation, I think, was wrong.

What happened was that people wanted to believe that just because they knew about each other that somehow that would mean that they were behind 9/11. ... On that part, I urge my analysts not to just simply stop with the fact that this doesn't make logical sense because [they are from] different branches of Islam. ... [There are] all kinds of reasons why that didn't make sense, but don't fall into the trap that just because it doesn't make sense, [there isn't] ... a reason why they might want to give these weapons of chemical, biological or even nuclear to these bad guys. Don't take it for granted.

[Did you believe the information from Ibn al-Sheikh Al-Libi, who was in U.S. custody, that Iraq provided chemical and biological weapons training for Al Qaeda?]

No.

[Did you know that that information came from him being rendered to Egypt [and possibly being tortured]?

Part of this was that there was a period of time after 9/11 in which every hard disk that was captured that had a picture of anything chemical or biological or nuclear had people jumping to the conclusion that they had weapons of mass destruction. ... The notion that they were playing around with poisons that could kill donkeys immediately had them thinking that they could poison the water in New York and stuff. I think that it got to the point where all we had was news, and the judgment was that we needed to act quicker, not wait until we had all the facts, so that news of questionable value all of a sudden became more important than it ever had before. ...

The level of evidence for most of these things about Al Qaeda and weapons of mass destruction I found shocking. I understood it, but it didn't stop INR from saying, "You've got to be kidding me." So we didn't just footnote the famous estimate on weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. ... It was: "Please, folks, the level of evidence that you have for making these claims wouldn't convince anybody. At least say, 'We are guessing; we don't know,' or 'These are shreds of information, and we don't have enough to make that judgment.'"

If you read the footnotes of INR very closely, the ones that are made public, you will find that what we often disagreed with was -- we said, "It wasn't that we disagree that on a point." We said: "You don't have the evidence for that. It may be true, but if it is, there ought to be a way to show that that's the truth. And based on what you've shown us, we don't buy it." ...

[What did you think at the time about the information coming from Curveball, the supposed Iraqi chemical engineer who gave the CIA information about Iraq developing weapons of mass destruction?]

I personally didn't know about Curveball, the name or the fact that there was this important source until I read it in the [reporting of the \[Silberman-Robb commission\]](#). I knew that there was HUMINT reporting on the biomass, and I knew that there was some question about that, but I was never made aware of how much reporting was coming from one source and the disagreements that existed between the operators and the analysts. It was something that came as a huge surprise.

And if you would have known?

I was arguing against the [mobile] bio vans, and I didn't even know about Curveball. I was going on only the information I had. If I had known Curveball and all the problems there, I would have been even louder, but I was pretty loud as it was.

Remember that this was at a time when we were actually in Iraq. We actually had access to these trucks. The first time that people came out with the bio vans, after we got into Iraq, was when it came out on unclassified report. In 30 years in intelligence, I've never seen a case where the report first appeared as unclassified. It usually is classified and then you declassify it. In this case, this report was written first and foremost to be put out to the public. ...

Why?

Well, I don't know, other than the fact that, within a matter of a day or so, the administration was saying: "Now we have proof that there are weapons of mass destruction. We found one."

I do know that most of the analysts in the intelligence community were very skeptical, very early about the information about the bio vans. ... [A] very small number of people had an excessive influence over people at the top, and they listened to people who didn't know what they were talking about and went off down a wild tangent that, ... by all the experiences of any analyst, they should have not walked. They should have said: "Whoa, whoa! This one has all kinds of problems with it. Be very, very careful with it." In fact, that is what we told the secretary: "This one has a real problem with it. Be very careful with it." ...

Do you believe the NIE is, as so many people ... told us, a tremendously flawed document?

Of course, but the problem is that that NIE is the most detailed and authoritative piece of intelligence done in that timeframe. That's the best that you are ever going to find. ... That is as good as we can do.

You mean ever?

Ever. Remember, the NIE used to be taking a very complicated and difficult subject and trying to put it in a page for the president and maybe four or five pages for the Cabinet and then maybe 10 or 15 pages of other sort of narrative. But that one page was always considered the most important, the one that went to the president.

And that one page was a distillation of 1,000 reports, researched over a three- or four-year period. ... All we are doing is we are taking current intelligence and writing it up. That is all there is. If you know what is in that estimate, you have everything that the president of the United States has.

Go back and read what the president said in that famous conversation with George [Tenet]. Remember what he said first. He said, "Is this all we've got?" And the answer should have been: "Yes, sir. Unfortunately that is all we've got." His instincts were right. He saw that there wasn't a lot there. But I guarantee you, that is everything we had. We gave him our best shot, and the president said, "Is this all we've got?"

And what did George Tenet say?

"Slam dunk." That was the "slam dunk" conversation. ... And so at that point, the issue became not is the estimate right or wrong -- because George has said it is right - - but "We've got to find a way to say this so that it represents the community's confidence in their judgment"; so that at that point, we were committing ourselves to saying: ... "We are certain about it. This is a slam dunk." Now, that was probably a bad choice of words on George's part, and I'm sure he would probably want to take that back if he could. ...

Should he have had the confidence? Should he have known better?

That's hard to say. ... This is one of those rare occasions when all the things that could go wrong happened, and we missed it. ...

There was no excuse for Iraq. ... We had plenty of time to plan for collection. ... We had a body of experts who were used to looking at missiles and weapons of mass destruction and had a good record at doing that. Were they perfect? No. They were pretty good at it. If you are going to get anything right, that should have been the one the intelligence community got right. ...

What you saw in that estimate was an embodiment of the best work of the intelligence community. That is as good as we can do. ...

Now, what does that say to you?

It's not acceptable. It needs to be a cooperative effort, obviously, as I suggested earlier. Policy-makers have to quit giving us a pass. They have to quit giving up on us. They have to say: "If I'm going to spend \$40 billion, and I'm going to put all these people on the problem, I'm going to expect you to produce something. And if you don't, don't come around looking for jobs." ...

[I've talked to some of the fellows who worked on developing a lot of the information about weapons of mass destruction. They have said they felt like they were in competition with the intelligence officers at the Department of Defense, that they knew what the "client" wanted, and that if they didn't write the intelligence that proved it, then someone else would.]

... [I]f that's the case, I still say it's the intelligence officer's fault. ... [A]n intelligence officer is there for one reason only: to provide the policy-makers with better understanding of the problems that they are facing, not make those choices for them. It is not their job to decide what is right and what is wrong. ...

[How did Secretary Powell put together his presentation for the United Nations on WMDs in Iraq?]

... [E]ssentially, after this meeting where the president said, "Is that all we've got?" the requirement for people became ... "You guys sit down with the speechwriters and other people, and let's put together the best case possible for what the intelligence community believes is a slam dunk." ...

[In other words, put together] a persuasive document?

That's right. It was an intelligence document; they wanted to turn it into a persuasive document. At some point I assume the president and another [person] decided, "Well, we want Powell to give this speech," so he was then put in charge of taking this draft that had been prepared from intelligence and making that the basis for a presentation for the United Nations.

[Powell] took that draft and read it himself, had real problems with it. [He] asked his staff to get together with the people of the NSC and CIA -- the people that put the thing together -- and he said, "I want to go through this line by line, and I want to make sure that whatever I'm going to say in this speech is not only something the community believes in, but they have convinced me ought to be in this speech." ... So we put together a 12-page critique, line by line: "We don't like this; we don't like that." ...

So his mind was already attuned to the fact that he wanted to make it better than he saw it, and he wanted to make sure that if there were controversial things in there, either 1) he had heard the arguments and had bought off on them, or 2) they went out. And it happened in both ways. In some cases things went out. In some cases he simply changed it to what we thought was the right answer. In other cases he accepted the arguments made by CIA. ...

I've had people who were in the room say that there were many things in that speech, even in the final draft, that he was worried about, and ... [Tenet would say], "Trust this; this is good." Is that true?

True to a point. ... The secretary never saw this as his speech. He saw this as the president's speech on Iraq weapons of mass destruction presented to the U.N., and that that was a responsibility that he had been given -- not to speak for himself, not to speak for his own personal views, but to speak for the administration and particularly the president. ...

He was having to depend on a lot of people that he didn't know, and he didn't have his hands on all the facts and the details. He was having to trust people on a whole range of issues. That's always one of the policy-maker's dilemmas: "A lot of this stuff doesn't make sense to me, but they must know better."

Well, when you have an organization as good and with as many good people as CIA, and they believe something very strongly and very sincerely, and they will come in and argue vehemently that they are right, it's not surprising that presidents, kings, prime ministers believe them. ...

If there is nobody else to say, "The emperor has no clothes" -- in this case, the

people who were shouting were too small; we didn't make the sort of impact that we could have made or should have made. But I'm proud of my people. They at least tried. And if they weren't always believed, then we had at least told people. It was up to them to accept or not.

What about the intelligence reports that Iraq was ordering aluminum pipes that could be used to make centrifuges for making nuclear weapons? How did that intelligence hold up? What was the community reporting exactly?

... The intelligence community was telling them that these aluminum tubes can be used to make enriched uranium. ... We told them they had the tubes. We told them how they would do it. We even got one of those tubes and tested it and said: "See? We told you they could do it."

That was all poor, unacceptable tradecraft from my perspective. It should have never, ever gotten to the point that it did. From the very beginning, ... the people who actually know what aluminum tubes are, people at the Department of Energy [in its] national labs, said: ... "Of course you can use these aluminum tubes to make centrifuges, but we wouldn't. It's going to be very hard; it is going to be very complicated. In fact, we don't think that they would go that way because it's so uncertain."

My analysts chirped up and said: "Listen, every bad guy in the world knows how to get the right aluminum tubes. Why would you go out clandestinely, buy a bunch of tubes that don't work, making it that much more difficult? It doesn't make any sense." That was the basic judgment of the experts. There were people who didn't know that much about it who said: "No. Well, I think that they would." And based on "I think that they would," the people in the [intelligence] community began to say: "OK, you're an expert. If you believe they could, we will go that way." ...

But you were skeptical. ...

Who would suspect that trained intelligence officers would give them such a bad bit of information? And it was bad. It wasn't even close. This is one of those cases where everybody in the community should have just said: "Wait. Hold on. There is not enough evidence here."

Now, it's worse than that. The fact is that the INR analysts not only knew what the experts were saying about these tubes not being the right type of tubes, but we [also] knew that if Iraq wanted the right kind, they could buy them. North Korea did; Iran did; everybody did. Everybody knows what tubes to use. Why do something funny that makes everything much harder?

Secondly, we also knew that [the aluminum tubes they were using] were the right tubes for the tactical rocket launcher. ... So they were building these rockets, and they had aluminum tubes that would do very well. We weren't quite sure that they were working on nuclear weapons, but they had these aluminum tubes, so we said, "They are going to use them for that." It was one of those jumps of logic that there was no evidence for other than the fact that we think that this guy is a bad guy and he probably wants to build nuclear weapons, so that he must have this.

The other part was it got so bad in terms of tradecraft that the word went out that there was considerable discontent within the experts at the national labs and at INR over tubes. So some bright person over at CIA said, "We're so right; we'll get these tubes, and we will make centrifuges." They had become so much of an advocate, [so sure] that they had the right answer, that they went out and hired a contractor to prove that they could be used to build centrifuges.

They ran the tests, and they didn't tell anybody about the details. In fact, for a while, very few people knew that they had had this contract done. I'm sure they were waiting to find out what the answer was before they told people. They wrote a report that basically said: "See? We've proved it; they could." And the people at the national lab[s] and at INR who were so skeptical began to say: "What are they talking about? What do you mean it worked?" The [skeptics] actually went to the contractor. They didn't go to the CIA; they found out who the contractor was, and they went and asked him. Come to find out, the contractor had reported something quite different than what actually [was reported]. ...

The fact is that somebody said these things broke. They were not ideally suited for centrifuges. They only worked for a short period of time, and it was only one. If you thought about building an enrichment array, you are talking about 1,500 to 2,000 [centrifuges]. They couldn't even get one to work for any length of time.

But [the CIA] didn't say that. They didn't come out and say, "We didn't get this thing to work the way we wanted to." It wasn't that they didn't have the right information;

in this particular case, they simply didn't tell the truth.

... Most of us believe that those people should no longer be allowed to be analysts because they went over the line. They broke the cardinal sin. They took and manipulated the data. And to my knowledge, nobody has been punished.

[How could they] lie on something important enough to take us to war?

I'm not going to go as far as saying that they are lying. I think that they were misinformed, and I think that they should have known better. But I don't even know who these people were individually. I can't imagine any analyst who doesn't realize that if the experiment that you worked to prove your point doesn't work, that instead of trying to fudge the results, the first thing you do is maybe you go back and rethink your conclusions. ...

By the way, the secretary, the president and the vice president I'm sure did not know that somebody had taken money and [gotten] a contractor to test it and that there had been problems with that test. That never was in a report that I saw. And if I didn't see it, I'm sure that people at the top didn't know it.

I'm not taking the policy-makers off the hook. They should have known better. But how can you blame them when people who should know better, who are professionals, who they have paid to do the right thing on intelligence, give them bad information or don't give them the right information or hold things back? There is no way a guy at the top can control that sort of problem other than to recognize that there is a problem and make sure that they double-check and triple-check everything. ...

But [what if] the vice president and the secretary of defense and president of the United States and many others really did want to go to war with Iraq and were basically looking for a justification for going? This is what a lot of CIA guys tell me.

They were wrong, by the way. I think that shows that they were not very experienced or don't understand very much how policy works or how hard it is for anybody -- even the president -- to go to war.

... I think that it is a very difficult thing to get this town to make a decision like that and actually go to war. As I've studied it after the fact, I think that there was still time in at least November or December of 2002 when the president really hadn't made up his mind. ...

I never saw any evidence that the president said: "I want to go kick Saddam's ass. Now I'm going to war. Let's do it. Let's find a way to do it." I don't think that anybody who is fair, who will look at the evidence, will see that that's what happened. There was a sense of inevitability that we might have to go to war if this guy didn't change. If what we thought was happening was happening, how can we allow him to stay in power? Sure. But whether or not there was a decision much earlier -- "We're going to go to war, and let's get the American people ready, and let's build up all the intelligence" -- I don't think the evidence is there to make that sort of case.

You can make a case that they made the wrong decision. You can make the case that they went too quickly. You can make a lot of different cases if you want to. But I don't think you can make the case that they decided early and plotted and planned and used the intelligence to get there and then declared war and here we are. I think that there could be individuals who understood that Saddam needed to be taken out and certainly weren't telling the president and others, "Don't do this," but I don't think that the people who most wanted to take Saddam were the people dominating the decision. They got what they wanted, but their advice was not the advice that was being taken.

What is the feeling at the State Department after we invade Iraq, after [leader of the Iraq Survey Group (ISG)] David Kay and others go over and don't find any weapons of mass destruction? The case isn't [a] slam dunk after all. What did it feel like to learn that you and the INR people were proved to be right?

I wasn't real particularly happy that we were right. I mean, I told people at the time: "We've got to find nuclear weapons there. ... We've got to find them because we had stuck our neck out so far." My first reaction was, "Oops."

... It was remarkable how long it took to convince people in the intelligence community that [WMD] were not there, and that wasn't because they had told the policy-makers what they wanted to hear. They believed it. They thought they were

right. ... They believed that because they had a long history with this guy, they knew what a criminal he was, so telling them bad things about Saddam was easy for intelligence officers. And it wasn't because they got pressured; I'm convinced they truly believed it.

Now, unfortunately, what I find difficult is that that means that our tradecraft and the way we go about doing our jobs and what people think analysts do is broken. People in the intelligence community itself either don't know or have forgotten how to do real intelligence. I can't explain it any other way, because if they sincerely believe that they were right, and you look at the evidence they had to make those judgments, you go, "OK, that's all they had; there wasn't much secret other stuff." You just assume that's the best they had because we were trying to make the case to the president and everybody else, "This is the best we've got."

Read that now and see if you are convinced that we had it, had it cold. Wouldn't you have had the same reaction as the president: "Is that all you've got?" My sense is that the intelligence community didn't realize itself that that's all you've got, because otherwise, how do you explain why they would take such risk?

Our tradition has been to be able to answer questions and say: "OK, I'm going to be straight. This is the way it is going to be." ... We always are hedging our bets, and in this particular case, we were out of character. We were really basically saying, "We've got it -- slam dunk." Now, to be fair to George [Tenet], that was the view that his intelligence professionals were coming to him and saying, "We're sure."

I think that to give the intelligence officers a pass on this one would not be doing my profession and my colleagues a favor. I think it's a disservice. We are the ones that are going to have to say, "We've got to do it differently." And if the policy-makers won't force us to do it, we'll do it on our own. We've got to do it better. We are going to have to find a way to give our policy-makers better information than we are doing now. We can't be content with the crap that we turn out. ...

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