

For
The
July 14, 2003

Immediate
White

Release
House

White House Daily Briefing, July 14, 2003

[Excerpts on Disputed Iraqi Uranium Allegations]

[...]

Q: Ari, does the President stand by all the statements he made in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq to the American people?

MR. FLEISCHER: I think you've heard what the President has said about the State of the Union remarks, about whether Iraq did or did not seek uranium from Africa. Other than that, of course the President does. And even on that, that is --

Q: And you still think he'll find --

MR. FLEISCHER: -- even on that, that is a judgment that the President has made in hindsight, knowing now what we did not know at the time of the State of the Union. And the President, in retrospect, would not have included that remark in the State of the Union speech, as you know.

Q: He still thinks that Saddam Hussein wanted to become a nuclear power and was trying to get uranium and you will find the weapons of mass destruction?

MR. FLEISCHER: Nothing has changed the President's thinking on that, absolutely.

Q: Ari, Dr. Rice said yesterday that the British still believe the intelligence that Iraq was trying to buy uranium from Africa. Does the United States think that that intelligence is correct?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, that is what the British have said. The British stand by their reporting. They have sources on their reporting that we do not have on our reporting, which is not unusual in the intelligence community. The British stand by it and the British intelligence services are very respected.

Q: Do we, independently, think that the British intelligence is right or wrong, or do we just not know?

MR. FLEISCHER: I think this remains an issue about did Iraq seek uranium in Africa, an issue that very well may be true. We don't know if it's true -- but nobody, but nobody, can say it is wrong. And, therefore, the judgment the White House has made is that it should not have risen to the level of the Presidential State of the Union address.

Q: What do you know about the sourcing of the British report? There's some idea that it came from Italian and/or French sources.

MR. FLEISCHER: As Dr. Rice said on the shows yesterday, we do not know the sourcing of the British report.

Q: I don't quite understand why -- a couple of points -- why White House officials are clinging to the idea that it may not be wrong, we just can't prove that it's right. I mean, what's the burden of proof here? Does this information not have the kind of presumption of being not true until proven correct?

MR. FLEISCHER: No, I think that when you look at Iraq's history, Iraq, of course, did pursue weapons of mass destruction, biological weapons. They had biological weapons prior to the war. Chemical weapons, same thing, they had chemical weapons prior to the war.

The third piece of the weapons of mass destruction story is nuclear. There can be no doubt in anybody's mind that Iraq pursued nuclear weaponry prior to the war. We had never said Iraq had nuclear weapons the way we have said that they had biological and chemical weapons. They had two weapons of mass destruction in a general sense, biological and chemical, and we fear they were seeking to reconstitute their nuclear program. All in all, not the type of actions a nation that is seeking to comply with United Nations resolutions should undertake.

On the nuclear issue, there is a long, documented piece of evidence, of history, showing Iraqi attempts to acquire the means to produce nuclear weapons. I remind you that Israel took military action to take out an Iraqi nuclear facility. Had they not done that, it's likely that Iraq would have had nuclear weapons by the 1991 Gulf War.

Iraq, as you know, has uranium that could have been used to make nuclear weapons. Where did they get the uranium and when? Iraq possesses, currently under IAEA safeguards, under lock and key, at the Tuwaitha facility inside Iraq, uranium that they got from Africa, from Niger, in Africa, in the early 1980s.

In 1991, after the Gulf War ended we realized that Iraq was much closer to getting nuclear weapons than any of the international community or experts thoughts. Flash forward then to the late 1990s, this, then, became the source of what the CIA concluded in their national intelligence estimate: there were reports that Iraq was continuing its bad behavior. They had done it before. It would not surprise people if they continued to do it again, or they sought to acquire nuclear weapons -- I'm sorry, or they sought to acquire uranium in the production of nuclear weapons.

This is the history of Iraq. It is this history based on the reporting from 1990s that led the CIA to that conclusion that Iraq was seeking uranium. And that's how it made it into the speech.

Q: Let me follow-up on one point, this is a President who prides himself on straight talk and accountability, and, yet, he has yet to express that he is upset about the fact that this intelligence became unreliable, something that passed his lips in the State of the Union Address, nor has he said who or whether anybody should be held accountable. Instead, this White House, from the President to the National Security Advisor, have, in a rather nuanced way, blamed the CIA and let it go at that.

MR. FLEISCHER: No, I assure you the President is not pleased. The President, of course, would not be pleased if he said something in the State of the Union that may or may not have been true and should not have risen to his level. There's no question about that. Everybody has acknowledged that.

But this is also a President who keeps his eye on what really counts and on the bigger picture. Nobody, but nobody, thinks the United States went to war with Iraq because Saddam Hussein may or may not have pursued uranium from Africa. We went to war because Saddam Hussein had chemical weapons, had biological weapons and was, indeed, seeking to reconstitute a nuclear program -- whether it did or did not involve uranium coming from Africa. That's, in the scheme of things, a minor element in the judgment that was made in the events that led up to war. And that's why the President has approached it in the manner that he has.

Q: Let me follow on one point. Can you answer the question that the President has still declined to answer, which is, should somebody be held accountable for this mistake?

MR. FLEISCHER: I think the officials have already been held accountable, and you've seen statements come out that have acknowledged that the vetting process did not work that the way that it should have. This administration has been very direct and forthright about it. That has already taken place.

Q: Ari, can I just come back to this idea of you saying it wasn't a central reason for the war -- which may be true, but it was certainly used to buttress the case and build a case that it was urgent that Saddam Hussein be dealt with as quickly as possible. Take it in the whole, when you look at the lack of discovery of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the fact that the intelligence surrounding its alleged purchase of uranium in Africa was erroneous, does that not speak to the idea that there wasn't a sense of urgency to go after Iraq and you could have waited, you could have built a bigger coalition to go in?

MR. FLEISCHER: No, I think again and again, the fact that the United Nations and the international community concluded that Saddam Hussein had unaccounted for botulin, VX, sarin, nerve agent, chemical and biological weapons that Iraq was pursuing nuclear weapons to reconstitution if they could. I think if you look at all those factors in the post-9/11 world, the only conclusion a President can reach is that this country needs to be protected from the threats that Saddam Hussein presents to our country. And that's exactly what the President said in his repeated public statements.

Q: But taken in the whole, is it not true that there wasn't this sense of urgency to deal with Saddam Hussein that this White House presented?

MR. FLEISCHER: Again, they were seeking to reconstitute their nuclear program whether they got the uranium from Africa or from somewhere else. The fact of the matter is whether they sought it from Africa or didn't seek it from Africa doesn't change the fact that they were seeking to reconstitute a nuclear program. The fact that they had biological weapons made them a threat. The fact that they had chemical weapons made them a threat. And that's why this President did the right thing and led our nation to war to remove the threat.

Q: You referred to it, Ari, as a minor element, but it was important enough to delete in the October speech, a reference to this.

MR. FLEISCHER: A reference to what?

Q: A reference to Iraq's alleged attempt to get the uranium from Niger. In that case, the CIA Director asked Mr. Hadley to delete it, and it was deleted. Should

that not have raised all kinds of red flags come January, when a similar reference pops up in the speech? Should not Mr. Hadley or someone from the White House made sure to check this out with the CIA?

MR. FLEISCHER: It was a different reference in the State of the Union speech.

Q: Well, it was similar.

MR. FLEISCHER: But it was different. And it's similar in the fact that it's Iraq and Iraq pursuing weapons -- that's similar, of course. What is dramatically and markedly different and makes the Cincinnati speech different from the State of the Union speech, is the Cincinnati speech had a sentence in it about Iraq pursuing a specific quantity of weapons from one country -- Niger. The Director of Central Intelligence suggested to the White House that that statement should be removed. It was removed.

The State of the Union address had different language, and it was that Iraq is pursuing uranium, seeking uranium from Africa. That's because there was additional reporting from the CIA, separate and apart from Niger, naming other countries where they believed it was possible that Saddam was seeking uranium. So it's an apple in Cincinnati and an orange in the State of the Union. The two do not compare that directly.

Q: Well, but it's an African country versus Africa. I'm just saying, should that not have raised red flags for someone in the White House to double check?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, that's why it was double-checked. And this is where we have acknowledged that the vetting process didn't work. Now, what did work was the vetting process in Cincinnati. And that's why the sentence specific to Niger with a specific quantity was taken out. But the broader statement about seeking uranium from Africa was vetted through the CIA. And the vetting process as it took place in Cincinnati did not take place for the State of the Union, and we've acknowledged that that is regrettable. But, again, over one issue of did he or did he not seek uranium from Africa, not whether Saddam Hussein was a threat and he needed to be removed.

Q: What steps are you taking to improve the vetting process, Ari?

MR. FLEISCHER: I think it's safe to say that everybody involved in the vetting process already knows that this process has to be improved. Nobody wants to go through this once more, of course. A State of the Union is one of the most important speeches a President can give. And I think everybody involved has learned the lessons from this.

Q: Ari, two questions related to this. First, when you say the vetting process didn't take place in the State of the Union, we know that there were conversations -- Dr. Rice has said so -- between the CIA and Bob Joseph here at the NSC, about what was contained in the State of the Union line. And there were conversations back and forth about what it could and could not say. So is it that there wasn't a vetting a process, or was it that the vetting process, itself, failed to convey --

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, of course there was a vetting process. But the vetting process in this case didn't work the way it did in the Cincinnati case, even though the language was decidedly different. And this is why Director Tenet said the

President had every reason to believe that the text of the State of the Union presented to him was sound.

Q: The follow-up to that is, if I understand your reconstruction of events right, you have a CIA that is nervous about a specific reference in the Cincinnati speech, puts that specific back into the NIE three weeks later. You go ahead to the State of the Union and you get a general comment drawn from the NIE --

MR. FLEISCHER: Based on additional information from the NIE.

Q: All that information is in the NIE. And then a week later you have Secretary Powell show up at the United Nations with no reference to it at all, because all of that information as described by the President is suspect. Are you telling us that the CIA changed their assessment during that time three times?

MR. FLEISCHER: No. I'm saying to you that the CIA, if they had said, take out the reference to seeking uranium from Africa, it would have been taken out, not because it necessarily was inaccurate, because it wasn't conclusive enough to rise to the Presidential level.

Now, Secretary Powell, of course --

Q: It was conclusive enough for the NIE.

MR. FLEISCHER: That's correct. That's why it was written into the early drafts of the speeches, because it was conclusive enough for the NIE.

Q: So something that's in the NIE is not conclusive enough for a State of the Union speech? The NIE is a classified document going to all of Congress.

MR. FLEISCHER: That's why the line was said, because it was in the NIE. That's exactly why.

Q: But it should not have been in the NIE, is what you're now saying to us?

MR. FLEISCHER: I think that's a question that the CIA evaluates over time. And the NIE said it conclusively and that is why it rose to the level where it could be considered as part of the State of the Union, because it originated with the CIA's inter-agency process of the national intelligence estimate.

Q: Ari, to follow-up on his question, the apple was a reference in a draft to the October speech to a specific quantity of uranium from Niger. To take another apple, the draft of the State of the Union speech -- according to Dr. Rice's briefing on the plane on Friday -- included references to quantity and place, and we were told that that was Niger, they were taken out.

MR. FLEISCHER: She was referring to Cincinnati in that. I talked to her afterwards, and she was referring to Cincinnati when she said that.

Q: When she said that on the plane?

MR. FLEISCHER: Yes.

Q: Wow, that wasn't clear at all.

MR. FLEISCHER: Cincinnati. Because all the Presidential, the State of the Union always referred to -- always -- referred to seeking uranium from Africa. It did not have the same Cincinnati line.

Q: So despite that red flag, this idea came back in draft of the State of the Union. You just said it was because it was contained in the NIE. The NIE had a footnote saying this information was highly dubious. Who on the President's staff would let him say something that the State Department had said was highly dubious?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, keep in mind, again, the process of a national intelligence estimate. There are six agencies in the United States government all involved in the intelligence community that put together the national intelligence estimate. It can be often a footnoted document where one of the six agencies will say, we have questions about it, this information may or may not be accurate. Unanimity is not always the standard for an NIE. It is an inter-agency process that lends itself to consensus -- in this case, consensus from five of the six agencies involved.

We've been very up front, and the State Department looked at it and they came to a different conclusion. All of the rest of the entities that looked at it came to a different conclusion from State, which I think also is reflective of why Secretary Powell, who works the closest with the State Department employees, did not include it.

Q: You told Steve that people have learned lessons from this. What are the lessons they've learned? And what changes have been made to the vetting process, which you said was --

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, I think that, frankly, as David pointed out, the speech was vetted, it was sent to all the relevant agencies, and I think it's going to happen in every future speech, as people are going to make certain that they do their due diligence with each and every sentence of every Presidential address, so that everything is made sure is as accurate as is possible.

Q: Coming back to the British. The White House is saying that what the President said was technically accurate, because the British are standing by their intelligence on this issue. And they haven't shared with you who their sources are. But why not -- it's not uncommon for the British and the United States to share their intelligence information, especially on an issue with this kind of profile.

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, that's a question that I can't answer. That's a question that has to be addressed to British officials.

Q: Has it been asked?

MR. FLEISCHER: But, again, it's not uncommon in the intelligence community for different intelligence services to have their sources. And they, in order to obtain information from those sources say, your information, your name or who you are, will not be discussed with anybody. That's often how people keep their sources -- as reporters well know.

Q: Is this not a top priority, though, for the White House to get this information?

This is the U.S.'s key ally on Iraq, and considering the fact that it's such a high profile question --

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, given the fact that the Iraqi regime is no more and they are not going to be seeking uranium from anybody, no, it's not a high priority to find out who the source of the British government is, because the threat no longer exists. **Q** Well, if the threat no longer exists, then why are you worried about -- why are they worried about -- why are you worried about asking them to compromise sources that no longer matter?

MR. FLEISCHER: I'm saying that that's often the reason that people give. But this administration has already dealt with the threat that comes from Saddam Hussein's possession of weapons of mass destruction, which, after all, is what this was all about. The notion that because Iraq may or may not have been seeking uranium from Africa undermines the case for going to war with Saddam Hussein, ignores the fact that Saddam Hussein has biological weapons, chemical weapons. And that was a threat to the United States. And that's why this President took that action -- whether or not he sought uranium from Africa.

Q: Can I just ask one quick follow-up, different subject? Kofi Annan today said that a lot of countries are concerned about going into Iraq to help the United States without being under the auspices of the U.N. What is the White House position on that? Would the White House, the U.S., welcome the U.N. sort of taking on a larger role in order to accommodate other countries and bring them into the fold?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, I think it's clear that the U.N. has indicated that nations' decisions about whether to participate in the reconstruction of Iraq are made on a bilateral basis. We've been working with the United Nations on a number of issues involving Iraq. And, of course, the Secretary General has a special representative who's on the ground, who contributed mightily to the creation of the council that is now representing the Iraqi people.

But this is a matter the United States is taking up bilaterally, with the various nations that are considering sending their forces to Iraq. I anticipate this will be discussed with the President in the Oval Office when he meets with the Secretary General. But various nations are making their decisions and we're working with those nations.

Q: Is that a "no"?

MR. FLEISCHER: No, it's saying that the United Nations has suggested to work this bilaterally, and that's what we're doing.

[...]

Q: On the Iraq question, when did the administration first learn of doubts about the information about Niger?

MR. FLEISCHER: In terms of the forged documents, that was revealed by the IAEA in March of 2003. And that's the key element on the Niger issue. But, you know, if you take a look at Director Tenet's statement about Niger, there's some interesting information in there. Director Tenet, when he talks about the former ambassador's mission to Niger, and then he reported back to the CIA on what he found when he went there --

Q: When was his mission?

MR. FLEISCHER: He reported -- when was his mission to Niger? I don't have the date when he went. But when the former ambassador went to Niger, he reported back that officials in Niger denied that they had any contracts with Iraq. They said they did not sign any contracts with Iraq. But in Director Tenet's statement, it also reads that the former official who the ambassador met with, the former Prime Minister of Niger, interpreted an Iraqi overture as an attempt to discuss uranium sales. So there still is reporting that they attempted to discuss -- that Iraqis attempted to discuss uranium sales in Niger.

Q: But there were doubts about the authenticity of this before the IAEA came out, because there were doubts in the America intelligence community.

MR. FLEISCHER: What Director Tenet related pertaining to the Cincinnati speech was that it should come out because there was only one source for it. Not that it was wrong, but there was only one source for it.

Q: Right. So what I'm saying is that at that time officials knew that this was shaky because there was only one source, which is a pretty thin read to base a Presidential statement on. So did they forget -- between October and January, did they forget in the weeks in there when they --

MR. FLEISCHER: No, you're missing the point I've said earlier about in addition to Niger, Africa is a large continent that has more than one country. There was reporting that there were other countries on the continent that Iraq may have been pursuing uranium from. Whether those reports turn out to be true or not, we do not know. The point is, the information in Cincinnati was specific to one country. The information in the State of the Union was much broader than that, about the continent. And given the fact that this is where Iraq did, indeed, as the world knows, get a portion of its uranium from before, it's not a statement that could be without merit. In fact, it could be.

Q: So you're saying the State of the Union was not specifically referring to Niger, it was referring to other countries?

MR. FLEISCHER: That's why the President said, Africa. And that was also because the NIE, in addition to the reference to Niger, talked about other countries in Africa, too.

Q: Was that U.S. intelligence information or information from other intelligence services?

MR. FLEISCHER: You'd have to ask the Agency.

Q: Ari, you've said that you didn't necessarily need this Africa information in order to make the assertion that Iraq was trying to reconstitute its nuclear weapons program. If it was a side issue, who was it in the administration that was pushing so hard to have this in the speech?

MR. FLEISCHER: It's a question of, the President was making the case to the American people about the threat that Saddam Hussein presented. This is one piece of a much broader threat. And I don't think you can say there was any person seeking to make the case. It's an ongoing case that was made, and the case was

made.

Q: But you had this taken out of the October speech, and --

MR. FLEISCHER: No, this was not taken out of the October speech.

Q: You had the Niger stuff taken out of the October speech.

MR. FLEISCHER: That's correct.

Q: You said, yourself, right, just a few minutes ago, that the reference to the other African nations may or may or may not prove to be true. You don't know. And, yet, you made a broad accusation of the continent of Africa selling uranium to Iraq based on what, something that you, to this day, do not know, may or may not be true.

MR. FLEISCHER: Based on the NIE.

Q: Okay, fine. But why, if there's that -- so much uncertainty about the information, why was there so much effort to find a way to carefully craft the sentence, the key being, hang it on the British, not the CIA, to make it accurate. Why go through all these hoops to include it?

MR. FLEISCHER: The reason the British were cited is because the British had a public document. We often refer to public documents, as opposed to classified information. How many times from this podium have you heard me say that I don't discuss classified information or intelligence information? The British report was public, that's why we discussed the British report. It was based on a public document.

Now, we've said it went through the vetting process, and that's exactly how it worked.

Q: But Dr. Rice made clear yesterday in her Sunday talk shows that what made the sentence technically accurate was that it was cited to the British -- not the CIA, not the U.S., that it was cited to the British. So you all went --

MR. FLEISCHER: And the British stand by it.

Q: Well, that's true. But you all went through a lot of hoops to try to get this into the speech. Why?

MR. FLEISCHER: Because this was information that was relevant to the case about whether Iraq was reconstituting its nuclear program. It was part of the argument that the President was making based on biological weapons, chemical weapons and nuclear weapons.

Q: But it didn't matter that you had --

MR. FLEISCHER: And the sentence immediately before it, Jeanne -- do you remember what the sentence was immediately before the statement about Niger?

Q: No.

MR. FLEISCHER: It was that Iraq is seeking five different ways to enrich its uranium. It was a broad statement and then the President made the specific reference to Niger. And he made it because that's what the intelligence showed at that time, and we've been very up front in saying since then that it should not have risen to the President's level.

You're asking, why did it rise to the President's level. The answer is it shouldn't.

Q: I'm asking why did somebody want it in the speech so badly?

MR. FLEISCHER: Because it was based on reporting; we had reason to believe the reporting was accurate.

Q: Just one last follow-up. Because of all of this, there are all kinds of new questions being raised on Capitol Hill about the broader justification for the war. Speaking of chemical and biological weapons from the podium today you repeatedly assert that he had chemical and biological weapons. The question is, we can't find them, so how can we make it such a blanket assertion that he, indeed, had them.

These are -- all these questions are being dredged up again on Capitol Hill. How much of a problem is that for you guys to run back through all of this, and why can't we find them, or why do you continue to assert that he had them if we can't find them?

MR. FLEISCHER: I think the administration asserts it for the same reasons that Senator Lieberman asserted it in 1998, and that Senator Graham asserted that they had biological or chemical weapons as well. And why a variety of CIA directors prior to Director Tenet, and why the Clinton administration said it.

It's because -- and the international community concluded that Saddam Hussein had not accounted for the huge stocks of sarin gas and VX and anthrax that he previously had; knowing that he used chemical weapons against his own people. That's why we've asserted it, because all the reporting indicates that it is true.

Q: Right. But do you now acknowledge it may turn out to be not true, since we can't find them?

MR. FLEISCHER: No. It's exactly what Secretary Rumsfeld said yesterday, that we have confidence, still, that it will be found. No question, that is what we believe.

Q: Ari, you've continued to defend the statement in the State of the Union speech about Africa and uranium, even while saying in hindsight it shouldn't have risen to the level of a Presidential speech, by saying, nobody can prove it's not true and another government still stands by it, although they won't share their sources with us.

Shouldn't the level of proof be higher for a Presidential speech, especially one by a President who's making a case to the American people for taking them to war?

MR. FLEISCHER: Sure. Sure. And that's why we have said this should not have risen to the level of a Presidential speech.

Q: Well, then why do you continue to defend the statement at all? Why --

MR. FLEISCHER: Because of the notion that what the President said is wrong, that the President included erroneous information in the State of the Union. There have been a series of allegations made that are unsupportable allegations. What we have said is -- you know, of course, based on the fact that Iraq did, indeed, get its uranium from Africa, from Niger in the early 1980s, what we've said is these statements may be true, they may not be true. It's part of the intelligence mosaic. Yet, this should not have risen to the level of Presidential speech.

Q: But you're trying to have it both ways. You're saying it shouldn't have been in the speech, but it still may be true. But you really don't know. Why don't you simply retract and withdraw the statement?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, we said it should not have been in the State of the Union.

Q: But you're still trying to suggest that it may be true in the end.

MR. FLEISCHER: That's because in the face of allegations that it was false, I think it's important for people to have a realistic understanding of Iraq's attempts to pursue nuclear weapons; and in the pursuit of nuclear weapons, they needed uranium, they had only a limited amount of uranium from inside Iraq; they needed to get uranium from somewhere; they previously had a history of getting it from Africa; and the reporting at the time indicated that there were suspicions they were getting it from Africa, indeed.

Q: The bottom line is, though, that you don't know for certain one way or not?

MR. FLEISCHER: I've said that many times.

Q: Ari, nuclear weapons aside, what's the status of the search for weapons of mass destruction, biological --

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, former U.N. Inspector David Kaye is leading the effort inside Iraq. He has an ever-growing team of personnel who are working for him, both in the military and in terms of the experts who have the information. They are meeting with mid-level Iraqi officials who were involved in the program. And I remind you about the finding of the Iraqi nuclear scientist who had nuclear components buried in his yard.

Now, I think it's rather odd for an individual to walk out of a top secret facility where they have nuclear components and bring equipment home with him. That's not exactly standard behavior in a dictatorial regime. It looked like they had something to hide. They hid it. The scientist hid it in his garden. It's been discovered. You have to ask yourself why would a scientist with nuclear knowledge hide nuclear materials in his garden. This is part of what's already been found.

The likely thinking is, Iraq was preparing for the day, which almost took place in the late 1990s, when sanctions were lifted, and this scientist knew where his equipment was. I remind you also, that Iraq, in the run-up to the war, was supposed to declare all its nuclear programs. They failed to declare the information that was known to be hidden in this scientist's backyard.

Q: You talk about how big Iraq is. Is there any percentage of Iraq that you've already inspected, and how much more to go, or is there any kind of a progress report along those lines?

MR. FLEISCHER: Richard, you'd have to check with DOD on specific sites and percentage of findings.

[...]

Q: Ari, you keep talking about the vetting process. But before the vetting process ever took place, someone here in the White House decided to put that claim into the State of the Union, despite warnings from the CIA and despite warnings from the State Department. Those are the facts. That being the case, doesn't the White House take any responsibility for that statement whatsoever?

MR. FLEISCHER: The statement went through the regular inter-agency process based on a document that was produced, deemed to be reliable, called the national intelligence estimate, where five of the six agencies had an opinion about whether it should be in there or not. So it was based on solid reporting, solid research by people here in the White House. That's why it was included in drafts. That's the exact purpose of drafts. And the drafts were provided to the Central Intelligence Agency and the other agencies. And the inter-agency process begins where they're reviewed. And some information falls out. Some information stays in. That's exactly how a vetting process should work.

Q: You had at least some warning. You put it in anyway. Do you take responsibility?

MR. FLEISCHER: No, the warning was about a different topic. The warning was about, as I said earlier, information specific to one country with a specific quantity. There were other reporting about other countries in Africa that led to the broader statement about him pursuing uranium from Africa, which is a statement that also has much history attached to it, given the fact that this is where Saddam, indeed, got his uranium from before.

Q: Let me ask you one other question. The centrifuge argument wound up not being totally legitimate.

MR. FLEISCHER: It's a matter of dispute, just as Secretary Powell said at the United Nations.

Q: This is under dispute. What evidence is left, public evidence is left that the White House can point to that Iraq was reconstituting its nuclear program?

MR. FLEISCHER: I'm glad you asked me that. Let me tell you. In addition to the long-standing ambitions that Iraq had to procure nuclear weapons, in addition to the fact that they had a nuclear facility that had to be destroyed by Israel before it was actually able to come onto line, in addition to the fact that the international community concluded that Iraq was much closer to possessing nuclear weapons during the Gulf War, in addition to the fact that we underestimated -- not overestimated, but underestimated -- how close they were in the early 1990s, we have seen, since the sanctions were imposed on Iraq, Iraq do the following events: they had an indigenous production overt and covert procurement of uranium compounds, they had development of multiple indigenous uranium enrichment capabilities, they had the intent to divert research reactor fuel and a crash program to produce a nuclear weapon, they had limited production and separation of plutonium for weapons research at their facilities, they had weaponization research and development of dedicated facilities aimed at producing a missile-

deliverable weapon. And, of course, we all saw it on TV, how many meetings did Saddam Hussein have with his nuclear scientists? Why did he retain the group that he called the Nuclear Mujahideen if he did not have an intention of working on a nuclear program?

So I turn it around: why would anybody think that a leader as brutal as Saddam Hussein would not pursue weapons of mass destruction, of biological and chemical, and then say, but I'm not interested in nuclear. That's not plausible, that's not credible.

Q: Ari, I'd like to ask a question that is connected with your, this, your final briefing, but is about the larger subject of Presidential news conferences and interviews. Why has the President -- I know you guys count these things differently from the way that we do. Why has the President done as few formal, solo news conferences as he has? Why has he done as few interviews, in-depth interviews with people who cover him regularly, as he has? And do you have any regret about that --

MR. FLEISCHER: I think every President has his own way of working with the press corps. I think every press corps has their own way of seeking access as much as they possibly can. I'm not sure that any press corps would be satisfied with any amount of access. Having done this job for two-and-a-half years, I think that's a fair statement.

But this President has a style that lends itself much more to regular, informal answers to reporters' questions that take place two, three, sometimes four days a week. I've had many people in the press corps tell me that they think that is a preferable way, than to the big, over-dramatized formal East Room news conferences.

Q: Who told you that? (Laughter.)

MR. FLEISCHER: Not you. (Laughter.)

Q: Did you tell him two questions does not make a press conference? (Laughter.)

MR. FLEISCHER: Many of your colleagues, Helen. And I think the reason for that is because reporters need to stay on top of today's developments; they want to know what the President's reaction is to today's news, today's headlines. And the President, because of his frequent accessibility on an informal basis, two, three questions at the end of a pool spray provides that.

And I think some people have come to the conclusions that these grand news conferences of the past are designed for a little more theater than they are for information. So that's the President's style. I don't rule out that he won't continue to have news conferences on an occasional basis. I'm sure in the able hands of Deputy Press Secretary McClellan, soon to be Press Secretary McClellan, Scott will do a very strong job of representing the press's viewpoints to the President. But it's an interaction. And you're not going to get everything you want all the time, Helen.

Q: -- accountability. You don't allow for follow-ups or anything. I mean that's, you know, you can't get away with that.

MR. FLEISCHER: Au contraire -- on Bastille Day -- (laughter) -- there's often

follow-up. There's often follow-up at these pools. But now, Helen, I know that you're not part of the pool spray. But it does happen. And everybody gets the transcripts of it afterwards. And so it's widely disseminated.

Q: Yes, but we have questions, too.

MR. FLEISCHER: I understand.

Q: And you cite unnamed sources, so how do we know that this is a widely held opinion? (Laughter.)

MR. FLEISCHER: Were you one of them?

Q: Not wishing to belabor the point --

MR. FLEISCHER: Mark.

Q: Not wishing to belabor the point, do you have any regret over the fact that he chose this different style? And just because that's your understanding --

MR. FLEISCHER: No, that's why -- that's my boss's style. That's the way the President sees his job to be accountable and to be responsible. My job is to reflect his style, but also to try to help the press to reflect the press's needs. Sometimes I get what I want to get more for the press. Sometimes I don't.

Q: What I was describing were forums in which he would be commenting on something that's not the news of the day. Is that not part of his job?

MR. FLEISCHER: No, and that happens, as well. As you know, the President has frequent sessions before the foreign trips. And he gets questions on there. And we have the American wire services in there, as you know. And there was a session that the President had on Air Force One recently, on the last trip, which turned into a rather lengthy Q&A session about any topic under the sun.

So we have -- right now we're going with the unlimited questions rule. We can keep doing that, if you want, since this is my last briefing. But, remember, there are a lot of hands up behind you.

Q: Another question on the President's style, it's no secret that he likes to be direct and to the point. And you said, you can assure us that the President isn't pleased about this latest uranium discussion. Why haven't we heard from him directly?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, you know one of the things that I reflect on when I leave the White House is what kind of a manager and what kind of a leader is President Bush. And I want to talk about that a little bit later. But one of the things managers do to inspire good, hard work among their staff is if something goes wrong, they deal with it. They deal with it at the various levels. But they don't need to engage in any type of public process when work doesn't go the way people sometimes want it to go. That's sometimes how good managers lead people, and lead people through positive inspiration.

Q: But this is a serious enough issue that we would -- I mean, I'm sure everyone in this room would like to hear his comments on this.

MR. FLEISCHER: And the President commented on it numerous times on the trip to Africa when he was asked about it. But if you're saying, if you were a manager and a worker for you did something for you that you didn't like, maybe you would go public and say something about that worker. That might be your style. It's not the President's style.

Q: But also you said that the threat of weapons of mass destruction no longer exists. I guess, are you saying, then, that you're 100 percent certain that those weapons of mass destruction have not been transferred to another nation that might be unfriendly to the United States?

MR. FLEISCHER: No, I refer you to exactly what Secretary Rumsfeld said on the topic yesterday. We're confident that we are going to find the weapons. And, again -- and I've always said this, there's nothing concrete I can report about whether or not any weapons were transferred.

Q: But how can you make such a blanket statement, the threat no longer exists, if you don't know --

MR. FLEISCHER: For the same --

Q: And you don't know -- you don't even know whether Saddam Hussein is dead or alive?

MR. FLEISCHER: For the same reasons I answered the question when you asked it a week ago and two weeks and three weeks ago, because the regime no longer exists, we're confident the regime will no longer use those weapons.

Q: But another regime might use those weapons if they've been transferred --

MR. FLEISCHER: And I've indicated to you that we have no concrete reporting about whether any of the weapons left the borders of Iraq.

Q: But you can't have a concrete saying that it's not a threat if you don't have a concrete reporting that weapons haven't been transferred --

MR. FLEISCHER: The threat is from the regime.

Q: Ari, were you able to ascertain whether this Niger-Iraq issue came up this morning in the President's meeting with Director Tenet?

MR. FLEISCHER: No, and I typically would not ask what took place at a CIA briefing on the information the President gets in his Presidential daily briefing.

Q: So there's basically nothing you could tell us about what transpired there to give us any indication whether the President --

MR. FLEISCHER: I think, frankly, you've heard it all.

Q: One more thing. There is a perception, at least, that in this issue that the CIA acquiesced to the NSA, and did not raise -- and that it did raise red flags, but then basically withdrew whatever their objections were. Is that accurate?

MR. FLEISCHER: I think it's fair to say that both institutions have very dedicated professionals who are expert at what they do, and they will typically talk about the mosaic that is before them and have discussions about what that mosaic means and what it indicates. And I think you have strong people in both agencies, in the White House as well as the CIA, and this is how they do their jobs. They share information, they try to come to conclusions.

Q: So they did not acquiesce in any way, in the way you look at it?

MR. FLEISCHER: No, I think what didn't take place is the vetting process could have led to somebody saying, take it out. That did not take place.

Q: I'm still not clear about something we discussed this morning. George Tenet said in his statement on Friday that he had raised the issues -- the issues that were addressed in the State of the Union address, he said, several times, with White House officials, that it had been raised. And, yet, Dr. Rice said, if there were questions about the quality of the intelligence underlying the charge that she wasn't aware of them and neither was the President. How is that possible?

MR. FLEISCHER: It speaks for itself. I think you have to ask the CIA about that. They had concerns that they brought to the attention of the British government, but it was not brought to the attention of the White House.

Q: But George Tenet said specifically they did raise it. He said, several times, with White House officials. Are you saying it didn't rise to --

MR. FLEISCHER: You know, I have his statement here. And he referred, as you said this morning, to the fragmentary intelligence. But I don't see the reference that you're making.

Q: And, Ari, if I could ask you one question about the press secretary's job. The job --

MR. FLEISCHER: Can I have Scott answer it? (Laughter.)

Q: You can. The job requires you to sort of strike a balance between serving the American people and serving the President. How comfortable are you with the balance that you've struck?

MR. FLEISCHER: I'm absolutely comfortable with it. That's why I leave this job, a job that I love, working for a boss that I believe in. You know, I think that working for the President, I serve the American people. The President answers to the American people. The President hired me. I report to the President, and in so doing, I hope I have served the American people. I believe I have.

Q: Does today's briefing reinforce your decision to leave? (Laughter.)

MR. FLEISCHER: It reinforces my decision to write a book. (Laughter.)

Q: Does that mean, "don't get mad, get even"?

MR. FLEISCHER: No, no, no. No, the answer to that is a categorical, no. There's no such thing as getting even.

[...]

Q: Is the controversy Iraq diverting the administration's attention to domestic issues?

MR. FLEISCHER: No, I think as you see right now, with what's happening on the appropriation bills that are moving through the Congress this week, appropriations cycle, unlike last year, it apparently going to be on time. And so I think you've seen the domestic agenda move forward rather nicely. Congress is back. Congress is going to be working on numerous bills this week, including the appropriations, where the fiscal restraint is still important.

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