

Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing

“An Oversight Hearing on Pre-War Intelligence Relating to Iraq”

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Mr. Chairman, a lot of people want to know why we were so wrong about Iraq's WMD. Some blame it on political pressure. Others credit a lack of human intelligence (HUMINT) for our poor showing. Some, particularly in the intelligence community, want to believe that it was a one-time thing — the “perfect storm” excuse. For me, all of these explanations miss the mark.

We got Iraq WMD wrong because we aren't very good at analysis, and haven't been for a long time. Take the 2002 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE). We rightfully are criticized for its shortcomings. Unfortunately, it represents one of our better analytical efforts. If you don't believe me, I urge you take a closer look at other NIE's. All of them share one thing in common — they are long on opinions, but short on evidence.

We can argue till the cows come home who is at fault — I put most of the blame on the intelligence community. As long as we choose to emphasize news over scholarship, we will continue to under perform. It's much easier for us to make up excuses than admit we are at fault.

But, this doesn't mean I give policy-makers a free pass — you too must accept some of the blame. It starts with you letting us get away with mediocrity. Demand excellence instead — don't settle for the crap we usually give you. You are blessed with an exceptionally talented work force, and you have been generous in giving them the resources they need to do their job. Now you must insist that we perform up to our potential and hold us accountable when we don't. Otherwise, the chances we will do better next time aren't very good.

While I'm on your case, I should touch a bit on your penchant for certainty. It's a useful concept in our criminal justice system, but has no place in analytical judgments. In intelligence there is only uncertainty. Be very wary of anyone who tells you otherwise. You shouldn't be looking for certainty in our answers anyway. We were

certain about the aluminum tubes. And, nothing could convince us that “Curveball” wasn’t on the level. As you know, in both cases we were flat wrong.

What you need to look for are the evidence and logic behind our claims. All our answers will be guesses — we don’t have any other choice. But all guesses are not the same. Sometimes they are based merely on a hunch. In other cases, we may have only bits and pieces of evidence. Even when we have considerable information on a topic, the analyst must invariably rely heavily on inference. There is no connecting of dots in intelligence. There are never enough dots, and any linkages between them are highly ambiguous.

In other words, make us show our work. Determine yourself what kind of guess we are making. Don’t rely on formulaic confidence levels provided along with the report. You are the one who must decide what to do with the information we give you. Unless the evidence and logic satisfy you, don’t use it. If you consistently get unsupported answers, get a new intelligence officer. I guarantee you that if you demand it we can do better, much better.

For those of you still uncomfortable with the uncertainty inherent in intelligence analysis, remember, for all its warts there is no substitute for good analysis. When knowledge is in short supply even small doses of it from the intelligence community can make a huge difference. And, a hunch from one of our experts is almost always a better bet than one of your own. But in the end, even perfect knowledge does not ensure a wise decision. That’s what you get paid the big bucks for.

Let me close with a few tips on how you can improve the answers you get from the intelligence community.

- Always ask whether other agencies agree with the answer.
- Insist on more than assertions and conclusions -- knowing how they derived the answer is essential.
- When they resist, and they often will, throw the messenger out of your office; tell others of your bad experience.
- Also insist that written answers include detailed comparisons of trends over time — how does it differ with their answer six months ago, two years, etc.
- For NIE’s, request an annotated bibliography of research studies completed since the last NIE — the more listed the better.
- Finally, rely on your own instincts — if the milk smells bad, don’t drink it.

Mr. Chairman that ends my opening remarks. I stand ready to answer any questions you and your colleagues may have. Thank you.