

Whose Disinformation?

By Gareth Porter | December 11, 2007

The reported White House resistance to the conclusion of the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) that Iran had abandoned a nuclear weapons program in 2003 was an effort to save a political tactic—justifying a hardline on Iran based on the erroneous argument that Tehran had a clandestine uranium enrichment capacity—that the George W. Bush administration had been using since early 2004, despite the absence of an intelligence analysis to support it.

The charge that Iran had a secret weapons program was originally devised to build international support for sanctions—and even potential use of force—against Iran at a time when Iran was not enriching uranium.

But in 2006, the hawks added the allegation of a secret Iranian uranium enrichment program paralleling the publicly acknowledged program to bolster the argument that Iran must not be allowed to have any enrichment, even if carefully limited to far below a weapon-related level and intrusively monitored.

The original Bush administration argument was that Iranian uranium enrichment at Natanz was *prima facie* evidence of a “nuclear weapons program.” On February 23, 2003, the State Department charged that Iran had exhibited “an ambitious rush to develop a nuclear fuel cycle, whose true purpose can only be to produce fissile material for its nuclear weapons program.”

That line took advantage of the widespread impression that the Natanz facility was illegal when it was revealed by the anti-regime National Council of Resistance in mid-2002, even though its construction was in compliance with Iran’s safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

When Iran voluntarily suspended its program of uranium enrichment as part of its agreement with Britain, France, and Germany—the European Union Three (EU-3)—in October 2003, however, it forced the Bush administration to come up with the idea of a secret Iranian nuclear weapons program.

It was John Bolton, then undersecretary of state for arms control, who articulated the new charge. He told a press conference on March 3, 2004: “We think the Iranians are still trying to conceal a clandestine weapons program.”

Bolton repeated the charge before the House International Relations Committee on May 24, 2004, declaring: “The

United States strongly believes that Iran has a clandestine program to produce nuclear weapons.”

After the Iranian enrichment suspension was extended under a new agreement with the EU-3 in November 2004, U.S. Ambassador to the IAEA Gregory Schulte reaffirmed the U.S. charge that Iran had a clandestine nuclear weapons program.

But the Bush administration’s charge was not backed by any intelligence assessment. That was a major issue at stake when the National Intelligence Council commissioned a new NIE on Iran in January 2005.

Significantly, while the 2005 Iran NIE was being developed, the public charges of a covert weapons program stopped, apparently on orders from Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

The intelligence estimate, produced in May 2005, concluded, “It is the judgment of the intelligence community that, left to its own devices, Iran is determined to build nuclear weapons.” But it remained uncertain about whether the evidence of “clandestine work” by the military amounted to a “nuclear weapons program,” as reported by Dafna Linzer in the *Washington Post*, August 2, 2005.

Equally important was the NIE’s conclusion that Iran would not have enough fissile material for a nuclear weapon until 2010 to 2015. That timeline, as Linzer reported, reflected “fading suspicions that Iran’s military has been running its own separate and covert enrichment effort.”

Administration hardliners wanted the NIE to support their allegation of a secret enrichment program to back up their pressure on Britain, France, and Germany to reject Iran’s 2005 proposal to the EU-3 for an agreement under which it would limit uranium enrichment to the low levels appropriate to nuclear energy and submit to an inspection regime proposed by the Europeans. A key administration argument against such an agreement was that the experience gained

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from even a very limited enrichment program could be diverted into the alleged underground enrichment program.

The key findings of the NIE were never made public—a decision that set that NIE apart from others covering politically sensitive subjects. Keeping them secret gave greater credibility to allegations of a secret enrichment program by Israel's Mossad. Israeli intelligence officials told a number of journalists, including Seymour Hersh of the *New Yorker*, that there was a second nuclear program in Iran run secretly by the military and the revolutionary guards that included both enrichment and weaponization activities. Israel used the parallel enrichment program charge to support its claim that Iran was much closer to having the capability to make a nuclear weapon than had been suggested by U.S. intelligence.

When work on a new NIE on the Iranian nuclear program began in the second half of 2006, the alleged covert nuclear weapons program was again the top issue.

By November 2006, the Central Intelligence Agency had already circulated an assessment within the intelligence community that rejected the covert weapons program thesis, as Hersh reported in late November. However, Vice President Dick Cheney and his aides were trying to exclude the CIA's assessment from the NIE, a senior intelligence official told Hersh.

The CIA had found no evidence for such a program, but Cheney and the White House were insisting, according to Hersh's story, that the failure to find a secret nuclear weapons program in Iran was merely evidence of the skill with which the Iranians were hiding it.

Another tactic used by Cheney was to cite a new claim by Israeli intelligence that its spies inside Iran had learned that

Iran had developed and tested a trigger device for a nuclear bomb. Conveniently, the alleged tests would not leave any trace of radioactivity, thus explaining why the sophisticated radiation monitoring devices placed in Iran by the United States and Israel had not detected it.

The CIA did not regard the report as reliable, especially in the absence of details that would allow verification. But Cheney asked for the original raw Israeli intelligence report, according to Hersh—the same thing Cheney and top Pentagon officials had done in constructing their case for the invasion of Iraq in 2002.

Cheney's tactics bottled up the NIE until early 2007. Last spring, however, the intelligence community came up with much more compelling evidence that no secret nuclear weapons program—including covert enrichment-related activities—had existed after fall 2003.

The White House responded by arguing that the new evidence might be based on an Iranian disinformation campaign, which forced a long process of proving that it was not information deliberately planted by Iran. That held up the acceptance of the NIE for several more months.

Recent briefings by intelligence officials have carefully refrained from naming any particular White House official who pushed the disinformation theory, but it was Cheney who was in charge of managing intelligence issues in order to protect the existing policy line.

Gareth Porter is an investigative historian and journalist who writes for the Inter Press Service. His latest book, Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam, was published in June 2005.

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