

The War They Wanted, The Lies They Needed

The Bush administration invaded Iraq claiming Saddam Hussein had tried to buy yellowcake uranium in Niger. As much of Washington knew, and the world soon learned, the charge was false. Worse, it appears to have been the cornerstone of a highly successful "black propaganda" campaign with links to the White House

By CRAIG UNGER

It's a crisp, clear winter morning in Rome. In the neighborhood between the Vatican and the Olympic Stadium, a phalanx of motor scooters is parked outside a graffiti-scarred 10-story apartment building. No. 10 Via Antonio Baiamonte is home to scores of middle-class families, and to the embassy for the Republic of Niger, the impoverished West African nation that was once a French colony.

Though it may be unprepossessing, the Niger Embassy is the site of one of the great mysteries of our times. On January 2, 2001, an embassy official returned there after New Year's Day and discovered that the offices had been robbed. Little of value was missing—a wristwatch, perfume, worthless documents, embassy stationery, and some official stamps bearing the seal of the Republic of Niger. Nevertheless, the consequences of the robbery were so great that the Watergate break-in pales by comparison.

A few months after the robbery, Western intelligence analysts began hearing that Saddam Hussein had sought yellowcake—a concentrated form of uranium which, if enriched, can be used in nuclear weapons—from Niger. Next came a dossier purporting to document the attempted purchase of hundreds of tons of uranium by Iraq. Information from the dossier and, later, the papers themselves made their way from Italian intelligence to, at various times, the C.I.A., other Western intelligence agencies, the U.S. Embassy in Rome, the State Department, and the White House, as well as several media outlets. Finally, in his January 2003 State of the Union address, George W. Bush told the world, "The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa."

Two months later, the United States invaded Iraq, starting a conflict that has killed tens of thousands of people, cost hundreds of billions of dollars, and has irrevocably destabilized the strategically vital Middle East. Since then, the world has learned not just that Bush's 16-word *casus belli* was apparently based on the Niger documents but also that the documents were forged.

In Italy, a source with intimate knowledge of the Niger affair has warned me that powerful people are watching. Phones may be tapped. Jobs are in jeopardy, and people are scared.

On the sixth floor at Via Baiamonte, a receptionist finally comes to the door of the nondescript embassy office. She is of medium height, has dark-brown hair, wears a handsome blue suit, and appears to be in her 50s. She declines to give her full name. A look of concern and fear crosses her face. "Don't believe what you read in the papers," she cautions in French. "*Ce n'est pas la vérité.*" It is not the truth.

But who was behind the forgeries? Italian intelligence? American operatives? The woman tilts her head toward one of the closed doors to indicate that there are people there who can hear. She can't talk. "*C'est interdit,*" she says. It is forbidden.

"A Classic Psy-Ops Campaign"

For more than two years it has been widely reported that the U.S. invaded Iraq because of intelligence failures. But in fact it is far more likely that the Iraq war started because of an extraordinary intelligence success—specifically, an astoundingly effective campaign of disinformation, or black propaganda, which led the White House, the Pentagon, Britain's M.I.6 intelligence service, and thousands of outlets in the American media to promote the falsehood that Saddam Hussein's nuclear-weapons program posed a grave risk to the United States.

The Bush administration made other false charges about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (W.M.D.)—that Iraq had acquired aluminum tubes suitable for centrifuges, that Saddam was in league with al-Qaeda, that he had mobile weapons labs, and so forth. But the Niger claim, unlike other allegations, can't be dismissed as an innocent error or blamed on ambiguous data. "This wasn't an accident," says Milt Bearden, a 30-year C.I.A. veteran who was a station chief in Pakistan, Sudan, Nigeria, and Germany, and the head of the Soviet–East European division. "This wasn't 15 monkeys in a room with typewriters."

In recent months, it has emerged that the forged Niger documents went through the hands of the Italian military intelligence service, SISMI (Servizio per le Informazioni e la Sicurezza Militare), or operatives close to it, and that neoconservative policymakers helped bring them to the attention of the White House. Even after information in the Niger documents was repeatedly rejected by the C.I.A. and the State Department, hawkish neocons managed to circumvent seasoned intelligence analysts and insert the Niger claims into Bush's State of the Union address.

By the time the U.S. invaded Iraq, in March 2003, this apparent black-propaganda operation had helped convince more than 90 percent of the American people that a brutal dictator was developing W.M.D.—and had led us into war.

To trace the path of the documents from their fabrication to their inclusion in Bush's infamous speech, *Vanity Fair* has interviewed a number of former intelligence and military analysts who have served in the C.I.A., the State Department, the Defense Intelligence Agency (D.I.A.), and the Pentagon. Some of them refer to the Niger documents as "a disinformation operation," others as "black propaganda," "black ops," or

"a classic psy-ops [psychological-operations] campaign." But whatever term they use, at least nine of these officials believe that the Niger documents were part of a covert operation to deliberately mislead the American public.

The officials are Bearden; Colonel W. Patrick Lang, who served as the D.I.A.'s defense intelligence officer for the Middle East, South Asia, and terrorism; Colonel Larry Wilkerson, former chief of staff to Secretary of State Colin Powell; Melvin Goodman, a former division chief and senior analyst at the C.I.A. and the State Department; Ray McGovern, a C.I.A. analyst for 27 years; Lieutenant Colonel Karen Kwiatkowski, who served in the Pentagon's Near East and South Asia division in 2002 and 2003; Larry C. Johnson, a former C.I.A. officer who was deputy director of the State Department Office of Counterterrorism from 1989 to 1993; former C.I.A. official Philip Giraldi; and Vincent Cannistraro, the former chief of operations of the C.I.A.'s Counterterrorism Center.

In addition, *Vanity Fair* has found at least 14 instances prior to the 2003 State of the Union in which analysts at the C.I.A., the State Department, or other government agencies who had examined the Niger documents or reports about them raised serious doubts about their legitimacy—only to be rebuffed by Bush-administration officials who wanted to use the material. "They were just relentless," says Wilkerson, who later prepared Colin Powell's presentation before the United Nations General Assembly. "You would take it out and they would stick it back in. That was their favorite bureaucratic technique—ruthless relentlessness."

All of which flies in the face of a campaign by senior Republicans including Senator Pat Roberts, chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, to blame the C.I.A. for the faulty pre-war intelligence on W.M.D. Indeed, the accounts put forth by Wilkerson and his colleagues strongly suggest that the C.I.A. is under siege not because it was wrong but because it was right. Agency analysts were not serving the White House's agenda.

What followed was not just the catastrophic foreign-policy blunder in Iraq but also an ongoing battle for the future of U.S. intelligence. Top officials have been leaving the C.I.A. in droves—including Porter Goss, who mysteriously resigned in May, just 18 months after he had been handpicked by Bush to be the director of Central Intelligence. Whatever the reason for his sudden departure, anyone at the top of the C.I.A., Goss's replacement included, ultimately must worry about serving two masters: a White House that desperately wants intelligence it can use to remake the Middle East and a spy agency that is acutely sensitive to having its intelligence politicized.

Cui Bono?

Unraveling a disinformation campaign is no easy task. It means entering a kingdom of shadows peopled by would-be Machiavellis who are practiced in the art of deception. "In the world of fabrication, you don't just drop something and let someone pick it up," says Bearden. "Your first goal is to make sure it doesn't find its way back to you, so you do several things. You may start out with a document that is a forgery, that is a photocopy of

a photocopy of a photocopy, which makes it hard to track down. You go through cutouts so that the person who puts it out doesn't know where it came from. And you build in subtle, nuanced errors so you can say, 'We would never misspell that.' If it's very cleverly done, it's a chess game, not checkers."

Reporters who have entered this labyrinth often emerge so perplexed that they choose not to write about it. "The chances of being manipulated are very high," says Claudio Gatti, a New York-based investigative reporter at *Il Sole*, the Italian business daily. "That's why I decided to stay out of it."

Despite such obstacles, a handful of independent journalists and bloggers on both sides of the Atlantic have been pursuing the story. "Most of the people you are dealing with are professional liars, which really leaves you with your work cut out for you as a reporter," says Joshua Micah Marshall, who has written about the documents on his blog, Talking Points Memo.

So far, no one has figured out all the answers. There is even disagreement about why the documents were fabricated. In a story by Seymour Hersh in *The New Yorker*, a source suggested that retired and embittered C.I.A. operatives had intentionally put together a lousy forgery in hopes of embarrassing Cheney's hawkish followers. But no evidence has emerged to support this theory, and many intelligence officers embrace a simpler explanation. "They needed this for the case to go to war," says Melvin Goodman, who is now a senior fellow at the Center for International Policy. "It serves no other purpose."

By and large, knowledgeable government officials in the U.S., Italy, France, and Great Britain are mum. Official government investigations in Italy, the U.K., and the U.S.—including a two-year probe into pre-war intelligence failures by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence—have been so highly politicized as to be completely unsatisfying.

Only the ongoing investigation by Special Prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald into the Plamegate scandal bears promise. However, it is focused not on the forgeries but on the leaks that were apparently designed to discredit former ambassador Joseph C. Wilson and that outed his wife, former C.I.A. agent Valerie Plame, after Wilson revealed that the Niger story was false. I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, the former chief of staff for Vice President Dick Cheney, has already been charged in the case, and President Bush's senior adviser, Karl Rove, has been Fitzgerald's other principal target. But, with the dubious exception of an ongoing F.B.I. inquiry, there is no official probe into who forged the Niger documents, who disseminated them, and why, after they had been repeatedly discredited, they kept resurfacing.

Meanwhile, from Rome to Washington, and countless points in between, journalists, bloggers, politicians, and intelligence agents are pondering the same question: *Cui bono?* Who benefits? Who wanted to start the war?

The Stuff of Conspiracy Fantasies

If Italy seems like an unlikely setting for a black-propaganda plot to start the Iraq war, it is worth remembering that *Et tu, Brute* is part of the local idiom, and Machiavelli was a native son. Accordingly, one can't probe Nigergate without examining the rich tapestry of intrigue that is Italian intelligence.

Because Italy emerged from World War II with a strong Communist Party, domestic politics had elements of a civil war, explains Guido Moltedo, editor of *Europa*, a center-left daily in Italy. That meant ultra-conservative Cold Warriors battled the Communists not just electorally but through undercover operations in the intelligence world. "In addition to the secret service, SISMI, there was another, informal, parallel secret service," Moltedo says. "It was known as Propaganda Due."

Led by a neo-Fascist named Licio Gelli, Propaganda Due, with its penchant for exotic covert operations, was the stuff of conspiracy fantasies—except that it was real. According to *The Sunday Times* of London, until 1986 members agreed to have their throats slit and tongues cut out if they broke their oaths. Subversive, authoritarian, and right-wing, the group was sometimes referred to as the P-2 Masonic Lodge because of its ties to the secret society of Masons, and it served as the covert intelligence agency for militant anti-Communists. It was also linked to Operation Gladio, a secret paramilitary wing in NATO that supported far-right military coups in Greece and Turkey during the Cold War.

In 1981 the Italian Parliament banned Propaganda Due, and all secret organizations in Italy, after an investigation concluded that it had infiltrated the highest levels of Italy's judiciary, parliament, military, and press, and was tied to assassinations, kidnappings, and arms deals around the world. But before it was banned, P-2 members and their allies participated in two ideologically driven international black-propaganda schemes that foreshadowed the Niger Embassy job 20 years later. The first took place in 1980, when Francesco Pazienza, a charming and sophisticated Propaganda Due operative at the highest levels of SISMI, allegedly teamed up with an American named Michael Ledeen, a Rome correspondent for *The New Republic*. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, Pazienza said he first met Ledeen that summer, through a SISMI agent in New York who was working under the cover of a U.N. job.

The end result of their collaboration was a widely publicized story that helped Ronald Reagan unseat President Jimmy Carter, whom they considered too timid in his approach to winning the Cold War. The target was Carter's younger brother, Billy, a hard-drinking "good ol' boy" from Georgia who repeatedly embarrassed his sibling in the White House.

It began after Billy mortified the president in 1979 by going to Tripoli at a time when Libya's leader, Muammar Qaddafi, was reviled as a radical Arab dictator who supported terrorism. Coupled with Billy's later admission that he had received a \$220,000 loan from Qaddafi's regime, the ensuing "Billygate" scandal made headlines across America and led to a Senate investigation. But it had died down as the November 1980 elections approached.

Then, in the last week of October 1980, just two weeks before the election, *The New Republic* in Washington and *Now* magazine in Great Britain published a story co-authored by Michael Ledeen and Arnaud de Borchgrave, now an editor-at-large at *The Washington Times* and United Press International. According to the story, headlined "Qaddafi, Arafat and Billy Carter," the president's brother had been given an additional \$50,000 by Qaddafi, on top of the loan, and had met secretly with Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat. The story had come dramatically back to life. The new charges were disputed by Billy Carter and many others, and were never corroborated.

A 1985 investigation by Jonathan Kwitny in *The Wall Street Journal* reported that the *New Republic* article was part of a larger disinformation scam run by Ledeen and SISMI to tilt the election, and that "Billy Carter wasn't the only one allegedly getting money from a foreign government." According to Pazienza, Kwitny reported, Michael Ledeen had received at least \$120,000 from SISMI in 1980 or 1981 for his work on Billygate and other projects. Ledeen even had a coded identity, Z-3, and had money sent to him in a Bermuda bank account, Pazienza said.

Ledeen told the *Journal* that a consulting firm he owned, I.S.I., worked for SISMI and may have received the money. He said he did not recall whether he had a coded identity.

Pazienza was subsequently convicted *in absentia* on multiple charges, including having used extortion and fraud to obtain embarrassing facts about Billy Carter. Ledeen was never charged with any crime, but he was cited in Pazienza's indictment, which read, "With the illicit support of the SISMI and in collaboration with the well-known American 'Italianist' Michael Ledeen, Pazienza succeeded in extorting, also using fraudulent means, information ... on the Libyan business of Billy Carter, the brother of the then President of the United States."

In an interview with *Vanity Fair*, Ledeen denied having worked with Pazienza or Propaganda Due as part of a disinformation scheme. "I knew Pazienza," he explained. "I didn't think P-2 existed. I thought it was all nonsense—typical Italian fantasy."

He added, "I'm not aware that anything in [the Billygate] story turned out to be false."

Asked if he had worked with SISMI, Ledeen told *Vanity Fair*, "No," then added, "I had a project with SISMI—one project." He described it as a simple "desktop" exercise in 1979 or 1980, in which he taught Italian intelligence how to deal with U.S. officials on extradition matters. His fee, he said, was about \$10,000.

The Bulgarian Connection

In 1981, Ledeen played a role in what has been widely characterized as another disinformation operation. Once again his alleged ties to SISMI were front and center. The episode began after Mehmet Ali Agca, the right-wing terrorist who shot Pope John Paul II that May, told authorities that he had been taking orders from the Soviet Union's

K.G.B. and Bulgaria's secret service. With Ronald Reagan newly installed in the White House, the so-called Bulgarian Connection made perfect Cold War propaganda. Michael Ledeen was one of its most vocal proponents, promoting it on TV and in newspapers all over the world. In light of the ascendancy of the Solidarity Movement in Poland, the Pope's homeland, the Bulgarian Connection played a role in the demise of Communism in 1989.

There was just one problem—it probably wasn't true. "It just doesn't pass the giggle test," says Frank Brodhead, co-author of *The Rise and Fall of the Bulgarian Connection*. "Agca, the shooter, had been deeply embedded in a Turkish youth group of the Fascist National Action Party known as the Gray Wolves. It seemed illogical that a Turkish Fascist would work with Bulgarian Communists."

The only real source for the Bulgarian Connection theory was Agca himself, a pathological liar given to delusional proclamations such as his insistence that he was Jesus Christ. When eight men were later tried in Italian courts as part of the Bulgarian Connection case, all were acquitted for lack of evidence. One reason was that Agca had changed his story repeatedly. On the witness stand, he said he had put forth the Bulgarian Connection theory after Francesco Pazienza offered him freedom in exchange for the testimony. He subsequently changed that story as well.

Years later, *Washington Post* reporter Michael Dobbs, who had initially believed the theory, wrote that "I became convinced ... that the Bulgarian connection was invented by Agca with the hope of winning his release from prison. ... He was aided and abetted in this scheme by right-wing conspiracy theorists in the United States and William Casey's Central Intelligence Agency, which became a victim of its own disinformation campaign."

Exactly which Americans might have been behind such a campaign? According to a 1987 article in *The Nation*, Francesco Pazienza said Ledeen "was the person responsible for dreaming up the 'Bulgarian connection' behind the plot to kill the Pope." Similarly, according to *The Rise and Fall of the Bulgarian Connection*, Pazienza claimed that Ledeen had worked closely with the SISMI team that coached Agca on his testimony.

But Ledeen angrily denies the charges. "It's all a lie," he says. He adds that he protested to *The Wall Street Journal* when it first reported on his alleged relationship with Pazienza: "If one-tenth of it were true, I would not have security clearances, but I do."

Not long before his death, in 2005, Pope John Paul II announced that he did not believe the Bulgarian Connection theory. But that wasn't the end of it. In March 2006 an Italian commission run by Paolo Guzzanti, a senator in the right-wing Forza Italia Party, reopened the case and concluded that the Bulgarian Connection was real. According to Frank Brodhead, however, the new conclusions are based on the same old information, which is "bogus at best and at worst deliberately misleading."

In the wake of Billygate and the Bulgarian Connection, Ledeen allegedly began to play a role as a behind-the-scenes operative with the ascendant Reagan-Bush team. According to *Mission Italy*, by former ambassador to Italy Richard Gardner, after Reagan's victory, but while Jimmy Carter was still president, "Ledeen and Pazienza set themselves up as the preferred channel between Italian political leaders and members of the new administration." Ledeen responds, "Gardner was wrong. And, by the way, he had every opportunity to raise it with me and never did."

When Reagan took office, Ledeen was made special assistant to Alexander Haig, Reagan's secretary of state. Ledeen later took a staff position on Reagan's National Security Council and played a key role in initiating the illegal arms-for-hostages deal with Iran that became known as the Iran-contra scandal.

The Italian Job

In 1981, P-2 was outlawed and police raided the home of its leader, Licio Gelli. Authorities found a list of nearly a thousand prominent public figures in Italy who were believed to be members. Among them was a billionaire media mogul who had not yet entered politics—Silvio Berlusconi.

In 1994, Berlusconi was elected prime minister. Rather than distancing himself from the criminal organization, he told a reporter that "P-2 had brought together the best men in the country," and he began to execute policies very much aligned with it.

Among those Berlusconi appointed to powerful national-security positions were two men known to Ledeen. A founding member of Forza Italia, Minister of Defense Antonio Martino was a well-known figure in Washington neocon circles and had been close friends with Michael Ledeen since the 1970s. Ledeen also occasionally played bridge with the head of SISMI under Berlusconi, Nicolò Pollari. "Michael Ledeen is connected to all the players," says Philip Giraldi, who was stationed in Italy with the C.I.A. in the 1980s and has been a keen observer of Ledeen over the years.

Enter Rocco Martino. An elegantly attired man in his 60s with white hair and a neatly trimmed mustache, Martino (no relation to Antonio Martino) had served in SISMI until 1999 and had a long history of peddling information to other intelligence services in Europe, including France's Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure (D.G.S.E.).

By 2000, however, Martino had fallen on hard times financially. It was then that a longtime colleague named Antonio Nucera offered him a lucrative proposition. A SISMI colonel specializing in counter-proliferation and W.M.D., Nucera told Martino that Italian intelligence had long had an "asset" in the Niger Embassy in Rome: a woman who was about 60 years old, had a low-level job, and occasionally sold off embassy documents to SISMI. But now SISMI had no more use for the woman—who is known in the Italian press as "La Signora" and has recently been identified as the ambassador's assistant, Laura Montini. Perhaps, Nucera suggested, Martino could use La Signora as

Italian intelligence had, paying her to pass on documents she copied or stole from the embassy.

Shortly after New Year's 2001, the break-in took place at the Niger Embassy. Martino denies any participation. There are many conflicting accounts of the episode. According to *La Repubblica*, a left-of-center daily which has published an investigative series on Nigergate, documents stolen from the embassy ultimately were combined with other papers that were already in SISMI archives. In addition, the embassy stationery was apparently used to forge records about a phony uranium deal between Niger and Iraq. *The Sunday Times* of London recently reported that the papers had been forged for profit by two embassy employees: Adam Maiga Zakariaou, the consul, and Montini. But many believe that they, wittingly or not, were merely pawns in a larger game.

According to Martino, the documents were not given to him all at once. First, he explained, SISMI had La Signora give him documents that had come from the robbery: "I was told that a woman in the Niger Embassy in Rome had a gift for me. I met her and she gave me documents." Later, he said, SISMI dug into its archives and added new papers. There was a codebook, then a dossier with a mixture of fake and genuine documents. Among them was an authentic telex dated February 1, 1999, in which Adamou Chékou, the ambassador from Niger, wrote another official about a forthcoming visit from Wissam al-Zahawie, Iraq's ambassador to the Vatican.

The last one Martino says he received, and the most important one, was not genuine, however. Dated July 27, 2000, it was a two-page memo purportedly sent to the president of Niger concerning the sale of 500 tons of pure uranium per year by Niger to Iraq.

The forged documents were full of errors. A letter dated October 10, 2000, was signed by Minister of Foreign Affairs Allele Elhadj Habibou—even though he had been out of office for more than a decade. Its September 28 postmark indicated that somehow the letter had been received nearly two weeks before it was sent. In another letter, President Tandja Mamadou's signature appeared to be phony. The accord signed by him referred to the Niger constitution of May 12, 1965, when a new constitution had been enacted in 1999. One of the letters was dated July 30, 1999, but referred to agreements that were not made until a year later. Finally, the agreement called for the 500 tons of uranium to be transferred from one ship to another in international waters—a spectacularly difficult feat.

Martino, however, says he was unaware that they were forgeries. He was merely interested in a payday. "He was not looking for great amounts of money—\$10,000, \$20,000, maybe \$40,000," says Carlo Bonini, who co-authored the Nigergate stories for *La Repubblica*.

SISMI director Nicolò Pollari acknowledges that Martino has worked for Italian intelligence. But, beyond that, he claims that Italian intelligence played no role in the Niger operation. "[Nucera] offered [Martino] the use of an intelligence asset [La

Signora]—no big deal, you understand—one who was still on the books but inactive—to give a hand to Martino," Pollari told a reporter.

Rocco Martino, however, said SISMI had another agenda: "SISMI wanted me to pass on the documents, but they didn't want anyone to know they had been involved."

The Cutout

Whom should we believe? Characterized by *La Repubblica* as "a failed carabinieri and dishonest spy," a "double-dealer" who "plays every side of the fence," Martino has reportedly been arrested for extortion and for possession of stolen checks, and was fired by SISMI in 1999 for "conduct unbecoming." Elsewhere he has been described as "a trickster" and "a rogue." He is a man who traffics in deception.

On the other hand, operatives like Martino are highly valued precisely because they can be discredited so easily. "If there were a deep-cover unit of SISMI, it would make sense to use someone like Rocco," says Patrick Lang. "His flakiness gives SISMI plausible deniability. It's their cover story. That's standard tradecraft with the agencies."

In other words, Rocco Martino may well have been the cutout for SISMI, a postman who, if he dared to go public, could be disavowed.

Martino, who is the subject of a recently reopened investigation by the public prosecutor in Rome, has declined to talk to the press in recent months. But before going silent, he gave interviews to Italian, British, and American journalists characterizing himself as a pawn who distributed the documents on behalf of SISMI and believed that they were authentic. "I sell information, I admit," Martino told *The Sunday Times* of London, using his pseudonym, Giacomo. "But I sell only good information."

Over the next two years, the Niger documents and reports based on them made at least three journeys to the C.I.A. They also found their way to the U.S. Embassy in Rome, to the White House, to British intelligence, to French intelligence, and to Elisabetta Burba, a journalist at *Panorama*, the Milan-based newsmagazine. Each of these recipients in turn shared the documents or their contents with others, in effect creating an echo chamber that gave the illusion that several independent sources had corroborated an Iraq-Niger uranium deal.

"It was the Italians and Americans together who were behind it. It was all a disinformation operation," Martino told a reporter at England's *Guardian* newspaper. He called himself "a tool used by someone for games much bigger than me."

What exactly might those games have been? Berlusconi defined his role on the world stage largely in terms of his relationship with the U.S., and he jumped at the chance to forge closer ties with the White House when Bush took office, in 2001. In its three-part series on Nigergate, *La Repubblica* charges that Berlusconi was so eager to win Bush's favor that he "instructed Italian Military Intelligence to plant the evidence implicating

Saddam in a bogus uranium deal with Niger." (The Berlusconi government, which lost power in April, denied the charge.)

Because the Niger break-in happened before Bush took office, *La Repubblica* and many others assume that the robbery was initiated as a small-time job. "When the story began, they were not thinking about Iraq," says *La Repubblica's* Bonini. "They were just trying to gather something that could be sold on the black market to the intelligence community."

But it is also possible that from its very inception the Niger operation was aimed at starting an invasion of Iraq. As early as 1992, neoconservative hawks in the administration of George H. W. Bush, under the aegis of Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, unsuccessfully lobbied for regime change in Iraq as part of a grandiose vision for American supremacy in the next century.

During the Clinton era, the neocons persisted with their policy goals, and in early 1998 they twice lobbied President Clinton to bring down Saddam. The second attempt came in the form of "An Open Letter to the President" by leading neoconservatives, many of whom later played key roles in the Bush administration, where they became known as the Vulcans. Among those who signed were Michael Ledeen, John Bolton, Douglas Feith, Richard Perle, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, and David Wurmser.

According to Patrick Lang, the initial Niger Embassy robbery could have been aimed at starting the war even though Bush had yet to be inaugurated. The scenario, he cautions, is merely speculation on his part. But he says that the neocons wouldn't have hesitated to reach out to SISMI even before Bush took office. "There's no doubt in my mind that the neocons had their eye on Iraq," he says. "This is something they intended to do, and they would have communicated that to SISMI or anybody else to get the help they wanted."

In Lang's view, SISMI would also have wanted to ingratiate itself with the incoming administration. "These foreign intelligence agencies are so dependent on us that the urge to acquire I.O.U.'s is a powerful incentive by itself," he says. "It would have been very easy to have someone go to Rome and talk to them, or have one of the SISMI guys here [in Washington], perhaps the SISMI officer in the Italian Embassy, talk to them."

Lang's scenario rings true to Frank Brodhead. "When I read that the Niger break-in took place before Bush took office, I immediately thought back to the Bulgarian Connection," he says. "That job was done during the transition as well. [Michael] Ledeen ... saw himself as making a serious contribution to the Cold War through the Bulgarian Connection. Now, it was possible, 20 years later, that he was doing the same to start the war in Iraq."

Brodhead is not alone. Several press outlets, including the *San Francisco Chronicle*, United Press International, and *The American Conservative*, as well as a chorus of bloggers—Daily Kos, the Left Coaster, and Raw Story among them—have raised the

question of whether Ledeen was involved with the Niger documents. But none have found any hard evidence.

An Absurd Idea

Early in the summer of 2001, about six months after the break-in, information from the forged documents was given to U.S. intelligence for the first time. Details about the transfer are extremely sketchy, but it is highly probable that the reports were summaries of the documents. It is standard practice for intelligence services, in the interests of protecting sources, to share reports, rather than original documents, with allies.

To many W.M.D. analysts in the C.I.A. and the military, the initial reports sounded ridiculous. "The idea that you could get that much yellowcake out of Niger without the French knowing, that you could have a train big enough to carry it, much less a ship, is absurd," says Larry Wilkerson, Colin Powell's former chief of staff.

"The reports made no sense on the face of it," says Ray McGovern, the former C.I.A. analyst, who challenged Rumsfeld about the war at a public event this spring. "Most of us knew the Iraqis already *had* yellowcake. It is a sophisticated process to change it into a very refined state and they didn't have the technology."

"Yellowcake is unprocessed bulk ore," explains Karen Kwiatkowski, who has written extensively about the intelligence fiasco that led to the war. "If Saddam wanted to make nuclear bombs, why would he want unprocessed ore when the best thing to do would be to get processed stuff in the Congo?"

"When it comes to raw reports, all manner of crap comes out of the field," McGovern adds. "The C.I.A. traditionally has had experienced officers.... They are qualified to see if these reports make sense. For some reason, perhaps out of cowardice, these reports were judged to be of such potential significance that no one wanted to sit on it."

Since Niger was a former French colony, French intelligence was the logical choice to vet the allegations. "The French were managing partners of the international consortium in Niger," explains Joseph Wilson, who eventually traveled to Niger to investigate the uranium claim. "The French did the actual mining and shipping of it."

So Alain Chouet, then head of security intelligence for France's D.G.S.E., was tasked with checking out the first Niger report for the C.I.A. He recalls that much of the information he received from Langley was vague, with the exception of one striking detail. The agency had heard that in 1999 the Iraqi ambassador to the Vatican, Wissam al-Zahawie, had made an unusual visit to four African countries, including Niger. Analysts feared that the trip may have been a prelude to a uranium deal.

Chouet soon found that the al-Zahawie visit was no secret. It had been covered by the local press in Niger at the time, and reports had surfaced in French, British, and American

intelligence. Chouet had a 700-man unit at his command, and he ordered an extensive on-the-ground investigation in Niger.

"In France, we've always been very careful about both problems of uranium production in Niger and Iraqi attempts to get uranium," Chouet told the *Los Angeles Times* last December. Having concluded that nothing had come of al-Zahawie's visit and that there was no evidence of a uranium deal, French intelligence forwarded its assessment to the C.I.A. But the Niger affair had just begun.

Into Overdrive

A few weeks later, on September 11, 2001, terrorists struck the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The neocons had long said that they needed another Pearl Harbor in order to realize their dreams of regime change in Iraq. Now it had taken place. According to Bob Woodward's *Bush at War*, C.I.A. director George Tenet reported to the White House within hours that Osama bin Laden was behind the attack. But by midday Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had already raised the question of attacking Saddam. Likewise, four days later, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz advised President Bush not to bother going after Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan but to train American guns on Iraq instead.

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Bush's approval ratings soared to 90 percent, the all-time high for any U.S. president. This was the perfect opportunity to go after Saddam, except for one thing: the available intelligence did not support the action. Ten days after the attacks, Bush was told in a classified briefing that there was no credible evidence linking Saddam Hussein to the attacks.

Now the Niger operation went into overdrive. The details of how this happened are murky. Accounts from usually reputable newspapers, the United States Senate Intelligence Committee, and other sources are wildly at variance with one another. In October 2001, SISMI, which had already sent reports about the alleged Niger deal to French intelligence, finally had them forwarded to British and U.S. intelligence. The exact dates of the distribution are unclear, but, according to the British daily *The Independent*, SISMI sent the dossier to the Vauxhall Cross headquarters of M.I.6, in South London. The delivery might have been made, Italian reports say, by Rocco Martino. At roughly the same time, in early October, according to *La Repubblica*, SISMI also gave a report about the Niger deal to Jeff Castelli, the C.I.A. station chief in Rome. According to a recent broadcast by CBS's *60 Minutes*, C.I.A. analysts who saw the material were skeptical.

In addition, on October 15, 2001, Nicolò Pollari, the newly appointed chief of SISMI, made his first visit to his counterparts at the C.I.A. Under pressure from Berlusconi to turn over information that would be useful for America's Iraq-war policy, Pollari met "with top C.I.A. officials to provide a SISMI dossier indicating that Iraq had sought to buy uranium in Niger," according to an article by Philip Giraldi in *The American Conservative*.

According to the Senate Intelligence Committee, the analysts saw Pollari's report as "very limited and lacking needed detail." Nevertheless, the State Department had the U.S. Embassy in Niger check out the alleged uranium deal. On November 20, 2001, the U.S. Embassy in Niamey, the capital of Niger, sent a cable reporting that the director general of Niger's French-led consortium had told the American ambassador that "there was no possibility" that the African nation had diverted any yellowcake to Iraq.

In December 2001, Greg Thielmann, director for strategic proliferation and military affairs at the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), reviewed Iraq's W.M.D. program for Colin Powell. As for the Niger report, Thielmann said, "A whole lot of things told us that the report was bogus. This wasn't highly contested. There weren't strong advocates on the other side. It was done, shot down."

"Faster, Please"

Michael Ledeen waves an unlit cigar as he welcomes me into his 11th-floor office at the American Enterprise Institute, in Washington. Home to Irving Kristol, Lynne Cheney, Richard Perle, and countless other stars in the neocon firmament, the A.E.I. is one of the most powerful think tanks in the country. It has sent more than two dozen of its alumni to the Bush administration.

After 17 years at the A.E.I., Ledeen is the institute's Freedom Scholar and rates a corner office decorated with prints of the Colosseum in Rome, the Duomo in Florence, and other mementos of his days in Italy. Having served as a consultant at the Pentagon and the State Department and on the National Security Council, Ledeen relishes playing the role of the intriguer. In the Iran-contra scandal, Ledeen won notoriety for introducing Oliver North to his friend the Iranian arms dealer and con man Manucher Ghorbanifar, who was labeled "an intelligence fabricator" by the C.I.A. Ledeen has made his share of enemies along the way, especially at the C.I.A. According to Larry Johnson, "The C.I.A. viewed Ledeen as a meddling troublemaker who usually got it wrong and was allied with people who were dangerous to the U.S., such as Ghorbanifar."

Apprised of such views, Ledeen, no fan of the C.I.A., responds, "Oh, that's a shock. Ghorbanifar over the years has been one of the most accurate sources of understanding what is going on in Iran. ... I have always thought the C.I.A. made a big mistake."

Bearded and balding, the 65-year-old Ledeen makes for an unlikely 007. On the one hand, he can be self-deprecating, describing himself as "powerless ... and, well, schlumpy." On the other, one of his bios grandiosely proclaims that he has executed "the most sensitive and dangerous missions in recent American history."

Ledeen props his feet up on his desk next to an icon of villainy—a mask of Darth Vader. "I'm tired of being described as someone who likes Fascism and is a warmonger," he says. "I've said it over and over again. I'm not the person you think you are looking for. ... I think it's obvious I have no clout in the administration. I haven't had a role. I don't have a role." He barely knows Karl Rove, he says. He has "very occasionally" had

discussions with Cheney's office. And he denies reports that he was a consultant for Douglas Feith's Office of Special Plans, the division of the Pentagon that was famous for cherry-picking and "stovepiping" intelligence that suited its policy of invading Iraq. "I have had no professional relationship with any agency of the federal government during the Bush Administration," Ledeen later clarifies via e-mail. "That includes the Pentagon."

However, there is considerable evidence that Ledeen has had far more access than he lets on to the highest levels of the Bush administration. Even before Bush took office, Rove asked Ledeen to funnel ideas to the White House. According to *The Washington Post*, some of Ledeen's ideas became "official policy or rhetoric." As for Ledeen's role in the Office of Special Plans, Karen Kwiatkowski, who worked in the Pentagon during the run-up to the Iraq war, has described Ledeen as Feith's collaborator and said in an e-mail that he "was in and out of there (OSP) all the time."

Through his ties to Rove and Deputy National-Security Adviser Stephen Hadley, Michael Ledeen was also wired into the White House Iraq Group, which was charged with marketing an invasion of Iraq.

Ledeen claims, as he told the Web site Raw Story, that he had strongly advised against the plan, saying that the invasion of Iraq was the "wrong war, wrong time, wrong way, wrong place." But the truth is somewhat more complicated. Ledeen had urged regime change in Iraq since 1998, and just four hours after the 9/11 attacks he posted an article on the *National Review* Web site urging Bush to take "the fight directly to Saddam on his own territory."

But to Ledeen, Iraq was just one part of a larger war. As he later told a seminar, "All this talk about first we are going to do Afghanistan, then we will do Iraq ... that is entirely the wrong way to go about it." He urged Americans not to try to "piece together clever diplomatic solutions to this thing, but just wage a total war against these tyrants."

In January 2003, two months before the war started, he wrote, "If we were serious about waging this war, we would, at an absolute minimum, support the Iranian people's brave campaign against their tyrants ... and recognize an Iraqi government in exile in the 'no fly' zones we control. ... If we don't, we may well find ourselves facing a far bigger problem than Saddam alone."

Ledeen repeatedly urged war or destabilization not just in Iraq but also in Iran, Syria, Lebanon, even Saudi Arabia. "One can only hope that we turn the region into a cauldron, and faster, please," he wrote. "Faster, please" became his mantra, repeated incessantly in his *National Review* columns.

Rhapsodizing about war week after week, Ledeen became chief rhetorician for neoconservative visionaries who wanted to remake the Middle East. "Creative destruction is our middle name, both within our own society and abroad," he wrote after the attacks. "We must destroy [our enemies] to advance our historic mission."

The U.S. must be "imperious, ruthless, and relentless," he argued, until there has been "total surrender" by the Muslim world. "We must keep our fangs bared," he wrote, "we must remind them daily that we Americans are in a rage, and we will not rest until we have avenged our dead, we will not be sated until we have had the blood of every miserable little tyrant in the Middle East, until every leader of every cell of the terror network is dead or locked securely away, and every last drooling anti-Semitic and anti-American mullah, imam, sheikh, and ayatollah is either singing the praises of the United States of America, or pumping gasoline, for a dime a gallon, on an American military base near the Arctic Circle."

"An Old Friend of Italy"

As 2001 drew to a close, such positions seemed decidedly outside the mainstream. Career military and intelligence professionals saw the relatively moderate Colin Powell and George Tenet, a Clinton appointee, reassuringly ensconced as secretary of state and director of central intelligence, respectively. "George Tenet had been there for a number of years," says Larry Wilkerson. "He knew what he was doing. He was a professional. What did he have to do with Douglas Feith? It didn't seem possible that someone like Douglas Feith could exercise such influence." But a schism was growing between the cautious realism of analysts in the C.I.A. and the State Department, on one side, and the hawkish ambitions of Dick Cheney and the Pentagon, on the other.

As for Ledeen, how much clout he carried with the administration is a matter of debate. But one measure of his influence may be a series of secret meetings he set up—with Hadley's approval, he claims—in Rome in the second week of December 2001. During these meetings, Ghorbanifar introduced American officials to other Iranians who passed on information about their government's plans to target U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan. Among those in attendance were Harold Rhode and Larry Franklin of the Office of Special Plans. (In a separate matter, Franklin has since pleaded guilty to passing secrets to Israel and been sentenced to 12 years in prison.) "That information saved American lives in Afghanistan," Ledeen asserts.

But other accounts suggest that Ledeen may have used his time in Italy to reactivate old friendships that played a role in the Niger affair.

According to *La Repubblica*, Nicolò Pollari had become frustrated by the C.I.A.'s refusal to let SISMI deliver a smoking gun that would justify an invasion of Iraq. At an unspecified date, he discussed the issue with Ledeen's longtime friend Minister of Defense Antonio Martino. Martino, the paper reported, told Pollari to expect a visit from "an old friend of Italy," namely Ledeen. Soon afterward, according to *La Repubblica*, Pollari allegedly took up the Niger matter with Ledeen when he was in Rome. Ledeen denies having had any such conversations. Pollari declined to be interviewed by *Vanity Fair*, and has denied playing any role in the Niger affair. Martino has declined to comment.

By early 2002, career military and intelligence professionals had seen the Niger reports repeatedly discredited, and assumed that the issue was dead. But that was not the case.

"These guys in the Office of Special Plans delighted in telling people, 'You don't understand your own data,'" says Patrick Lang. "We know that Saddam is evil and deceptive, and if you see this piece of data, to say just because it is not well supported it's not true is to be politically naïve."

Not everybody in the C.I.A. was of one mind with regard to the alleged Niger deal. As the Senate Intelligence Committee report points out, some analysts at the C.I.A. and other agencies considered the Niger deal to be "possible." In the fall of 2002, the C.I.A. approved language referring to the Niger deal in one speech by the president but vetoed it in another. And in December 2002, analysts at WINPAC, the C.I.A.'s center for Weapons Intelligence, Nonproliferation, and Arms Control, produced a paper that chided Iraq for not acknowledging its "efforts to procure uranium from Niger."

Nevertheless, the C.I.A. had enough doubts about the Niger claims to initially leave them out of the President's Daily Brief (P.D.B.), the intelligence updates given each morning to President Bush. On February 5, 2002, however, for reasons that remain unclear, the C.I.A. issued a new report on the alleged Niger deal, one that provided significantly more detail, including what was said to be "verbatim text" of the accord between Niger and Iraq. In the State Department, analysts were still suspicious of the reports. But in the Pentagon, the Vulcans pounced on the new material. On February 12, the D.I.A. issued "a finished intelligence product," titled "Niamey Signed an Agreement to Sell 500 Tons of Uranium a Year to Baghdad," and passed it to the office of Vice President Dick Cheney.

Cheney gave the Niger claims new life. "The [C.I.A.] briefer came in. Cheney said, 'What about this?,' and the briefer hadn't heard one word, because no one in the agency thought it was of any significance," says Ray McGovern, whose job at the C.I.A. included preparing and delivering the P.D.B. in the Reagan era. "But when a briefer gets a request from the vice president of the United States, he goes back and leaves no stone unturned."

The C.I.A.'s Directorate of Operations, the branch responsible for the clandestine collection of foreign intelligence, immediately tasked its Counterproliferation Division (CPD) with getting more information. According to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence report, just hours after Dick Cheney had gotten the Niger report, Valerie Plame, who worked in the CPD, wrote a memo to the division's deputy chief that read, "My husband has good relations with both the PM [prime minister] and the former Minister of Mines (not to mention lots of French contacts), both of whom could possibly shed light on this sort of activity."

Her husband, as the world now knows, was Joseph Wilson, who had served as deputy chief of mission at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad and as ambassador to Gabon under George H. W. Bush. Wilson approached the task with a healthy skepticism. "The office of the vice president had asked me to check this out," Wilson told *Vanity Fair*. "My

skepticism was the same as it would have been with any unverified intelligence report, because there is a lot of stuff that comes over the transom every day."

He arrived in Niger on February 26, 2002. "Niger has a simplistic government structure," he says. "Both the minister of mines and the prime minister had gone through the mines. The French were managing partners of the international consortium. The French mining company actually had its hands on the product. Nobody else in the consortium had operators on the ground."

In addition, Wilson personally knew Wissam al-Zahawie, the Iraqi ambassador to the Vatican, whose visit to Niger had raised suspicions. "Wissam al-Zahawie was a world-class opera singer, and he went to the Vatican as his last post so he could be near the great European opera houses in Rome," says Wilson. "He was not in the Ba'thist inner circle. He was not in Saddam's tribe. The idea that he would be entrusted with this super-secret mission to buy 500 tons of uranium from Niger is out of the question."

On March 1, the State Department weighed in with another cable, headed "Sale of Niger Uranium to Iraq Unlikely." Citing "unequivocal" control of the mines, the cable asserted that President Tandja of Niger would not want to risk good relations with the U.S. by trading with Iraq, and cited the prohibitive logistical problems in such a transaction.

A few days later, Wilson returned from Niger and told C.I.A. officials that he had found no evidence to support the uranium charges. By now the Niger reports had been discredited more than half a dozen times—by the French in 2001, by the C.I.A. in Rome and in Langley, by the State Department's INR, by some analysts in the Pentagon, by the ambassador to Niger, by Wilson, and yet again by State.

But the top brass at the C.I.A. knew what Cheney wanted. They went back to French intelligence again—twice. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the second request that year, in mid-2002, "was more urgent and more specific." The C.I.A. sought confirmation of the alleged agreement by Niger to sell 500 tons of yellowcake to Iraq. Alain Chouet reportedly sent five or six men to Niger and again found the charges to be false. Then his staff noticed that the allegations matched those brought to him by Rocco Martino. "We told the Americans, 'Bullshit. It doesn't make any sense.'"

The Marketing Campaign

Until this point, the American people had been largely oblivious to the Bush administration's emerging policy toward Iraq. But in August 2002, just as Douglas Feith's Office of Special Plans formally set up shop in the Pentagon, White House chief of staff Andrew Card launched the White House Iraq Group to sell the war through the media. The plan was to open a full-fledged marketing campaign after Labor Day, featuring images of nuclear devastation and threats of biological and chemical weapons. A key piece of the evidence was the Niger dossier.

Test-marketing began in August, with Cheney and his surrogates asserting repeatedly that "many of us are convinced that Saddam will acquire nuclear weapons fairly soon." Making Cheney seem moderate by comparison, a piece by Ledeen appeared in *The Wall Street Journal* on September 4, suggesting that, in addition to Iraq, the governments of Iran, Syria, and Saudi Arabia should be overthrown.

But the real push was delayed until the second week of September. As Card famously put it, "From a marketing point of view, you don't introduce new products in August." The first anniversary of the 9/11 attacks was perfect.

The opening salvo was fired on Sunday, September 8, 2002, when National-Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice told CNN, "There will always be some uncertainty about how quickly [Saddam] can acquire nuclear weapons. But we don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud."

The smoking-gun-mushroom-cloud catchphrase was such a hit that Bush, Cheney, and Rumsfeld all picked it up in one form or another, sending it out repeatedly to the entire country.

Meanwhile, the C.I.A. had finally penetrated Saddam's inner sanctum by "turning" Foreign Minister Naji Sabri. Tenet delivered the news personally to Bush, Cheney, and other top officials in September 2002. Initially, the White House was ecstatic about this coup.

But, according to Tyler Drumheller, the C.I.A.'s chief of operations in Europe until he retired last year, that reaction changed dramatically when they heard what Sabri had to say. "He told us that they had no active weapons-of-mass-destruction program," Drumheller told *60 Minutes*. "The [White House] group that was dealing with the preparation for the Iraq war came back and said they were no longer interested. And we said, 'Well, what about the intel?' And they said, 'Well, this isn't about intel anymore. This is about regime change.'"

At roughly the same time, highly placed White House sources such as Scooter Libby leaked exclusive "scoops" to credulous reporters as part of the campaign to make Saddam's nuclear threat seem real. On the same day the "mushroom cloud" slogan made its debut, *The New York Times* printed a front-page story by Michael Gordon and Judith Miller citing administration officials who said that Saddam had "embarked on a worldwide hunt for materials to make an atomic bomb." Specifically, the article contended that Iraq "has sought to buy thousands of specially designed aluminum tubes, which American officials believe were intended as components of centrifuges to enrich uranium."

The next day, September 9, the White House received a visitor who should have known exactly what the tubes were for—Nicolò Pollari. As it happens, the Italians used the same tubes Iraq was seeking in their Medusa air-to-ground missile systems, so Pollari presumably knew that Iraq was not trying to enrich uranium but merely attempting to

reproduce weaponry dating back to an era of military trade between Rome and Baghdad. As *La Repubblica* pointed out, however, he did not set the record straight.

Pollari met with Stephen Hadley, an understated but resolute hawk who has since replaced Condoleezza Rice as national-security adviser. Hadley has confirmed that he met Pollari, but declined to say what was discussed. "It was a courtesy call," Hadley told reporters. "Nobody participating in that meeting or asked about that meeting has any recollection of a discussion of natural uranium, or any recollection of any documents being passed."

But there was no need to pass documents. It was significant enough for Pollari to have met with Hadley, a White House official allied with Cheney's hard-liners, rather than with Pollari's American counterpart, George Tenet. "It is completely out of protocol for the head of a foreign intelligence service to circumvent the C.I.A.," says former C.I.A. officer Philip Giraldi. "It is uniquely unusual. In spite of lots of people having seen these documents, and having said they were not right, they went around them."

"To me there is no benign interpretation of this," says Melvin Goodman, the former C.I.A. and State Department analyst. "At the highest level it was known the documents were forgeries. Stephen Hadley knew it. Condi Rice knew it. Everyone at the highest level knew." Both Rice and Hadley have declined to comment.

Michael Ledeen, who had access to both Pollari and Hadley, categorically denies setting up the meeting: "I had nothing to do with it." A former senior intelligence official close to Tenet says that the former C.I.A. chief had no information suggesting that Pollari or elements of SISMI may have been trying to circumvent the C.I.A. and go directly to the White House.

But the Niger documents had been resurrected once again. Two days later, on September 11, 2002, the first anniversary of the terrorist attacks, Hadley's office asked the C.I.A. to clear language so that President Bush could issue a statement saying, "Within the past few years, Iraq has resumed efforts to purchase large quantities of a type of uranium oxide known as yellowcake. ... The regime was caught trying to purchase 500 metric tons of this material. It takes about 10 tons to produce enough enriched uranium for a single nuclear weapon."

In addition, in a new paper that month, the D.I.A. issued an assessment claiming that "Iraq has been vigorously trying to procure uranium ore and yellowcake."

Later that month, the British published a 50-page, 14-point report on Iraq's pursuit of weapons that said, "There is intelligence that Iraq has sought the supply of significant quantities of uranium from Africa."

"When you are playing a disinformation operation," says Milt Bearden, "you're like a conductor who can single out one note in the symphony and say, 'Let the Brits have that.'"

On September 24, Prime Minister Tony Blair cited that "dossier of death" and asserted again that Iraq had tried to acquire uranium from Africa. "The reports in [the Niger file] were going around the world, and Bush and Blair were talking about the documents without actually mentioning them," Rocco Martino told Milan's *Il Giornale*. "I turned the television on and I did not believe my ears."

Now it was time for the international media to chime in with independent corroboration. In early October 2002, Martino approached Elisabetta Burba, a journalist at *Panorama*, the Milan-based newsmagazine. Burba and Martino had worked together in the past, but there may have been other reasons he went to her again. Owned by Silvio Berlusconi, *Panorama* was edited by Carlo Rossella, a close ally of the prime minister's. It also counted among its contributors Michael Ledeen.

Martino told Burba he had something truly explosive—documents that proved Saddam was buying yellowcake from Niger. Burba was intrigued, but skeptical. She agreed to pay just over 10,000 euros—about \$12,500—on one condition: Martino would get paid only after his dossier had been corroborated by independent authorities. Martino gave her the documents.

When Burba told Rossella of her concerns about the authenticity of the Niger documents, he sent her to Africa to investigate. But he also insisted that she give copies to the U.S. Embassy. "I think the Americans are very interested in this problem of unconventional weapons," Rossella told her.

On October 17, Burba flew to Niger. Once there, she discovered for herself how difficult it would be to ship 500 tons of uranium out of Africa. By the time she returned, she believed the real story was not about Saddam's secret nuclear-weapons program at all, but about whether someone had forged the documents to fabricate a rationale for invading Iraq. But when she reported her findings to Rossella, he called her off. "I told her to forget the documents," he told *Vanity Fair*. "From my point of view, the story was over."

Now, however, thanks to *Panorama*, the U.S. had received copies of the Niger documents. They were quickly disseminated to the C.I.A. station chief in Rome, who recognized them as the same old story the Italians had been pushing months before, and to nuclear experts at the D.I.A., the Energy Department, and the N.S.A.

The State Department had already twice cast doubt on the reports of the sale of uranium to Iraq. In the fall, Wayne White, who served as the deputy director of the State Department's intelligence unit and was the principal Iraq analyst, reviewed the papers themselves. According to *The Boston Globe*, he said that after a 15-minute review he doubted their authenticity.

"Stick That Baby in There"

In early October, Bush was scheduled to give a major address on Iraq in Cincinnati. A few days earlier, according to the Senate Intelligence Committee report, the N.S.C. sent

the C.I.A. a draft which asserted that Saddam "has been caught attempting to purchase up to 500 metric tons of uranium oxide from Africa—an essential ingredient in the enrichment process."

The C.I.A. faxed a memo to Hadley and the speechwriters telling them to delete the sentence on uranium, "because the amount is in dispute and it is debatable whether it can be acquired from the source. We told Congress that the Brits have exaggerated this issue. Finally, the Iraqis already have 550 metric tons of uranium oxide in their inventory." Iraq's supply of yellowcake dated back to the 1980s, when it had imported hundreds of tons of uranium ore from Niger and mined the rest itself. The C.I.A. felt that if Saddam was trying to revive his nuclear program he would be more likely to use his own stockpile than risk exposure in an illegal international deal.

But the White House refused to let go. Later that day, Hadley's staff sent over another draft of the Cincinnati speech, which stated, "The regime has been caught attempting to purchase substantial amounts of uranium oxide from sources in Africa."

This time, George Tenet himself interceded to keep the president from making false statements. According to his Senate testimony, he told Hadley that the "president should not be a fact witness on this issue," because the "reporting was weak." The C.I.A. even put it in writing and faxed it to the N.S.C.

The neocons were not done yet, however. "That was their favorite technique," says Larry Wilkerson, "stick that baby in there 47 times and on the 47th time it will stay. At every level of the decision-making process you had to have your ax out, ready to chop their fingers off. Sooner or later you would miss one and it would get in there."

For the next two months, December 2002 and January 2003, references to the uranium deal resurfaced again and again in "fact sheets," talking-point memos, and speeches. Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Powell, and Rice all declared publicly that Iraq had been caught trying to buy uranium from Niger. On December 19, the claim reappeared on a fact sheet published by the State Department. The bureaucratic battle was unending. In light of the many differing viewpoints, the Pentagon asked the National Intelligence Council, the body that oversees the 15 agencies in the U.S. intelligence community, to resolve the matter. According to *The Washington Post*, in a January 2003 memo the council replied unequivocally that "the Niger story was baseless and should be laid to rest." The memo went immediately to Bush and his advisers.

Nevertheless, on January 20, with war imminent, President Bush submitted a report to Congress citing Iraq's attempts "to acquire uranium and the means to enrich it."

At an N.S.C. meeting on January 27, 2003, George Tenet was given a hard-copy draft of the State of the Union address. Bush was to deliver it the next day. Acutely aware of the ongoing intelligence wars, Tenet was caught between the hard-liners in the White House, to whom he reported, and the C.I.A., whose integrity he was duty-bound to uphold. That day, he returned to C.I.A. headquarters and, without even reading the speech, gave a copy

to an assistant who was told to deliver it to the deputy director for intelligence. But, according to the Senate Intelligence Committee report, no one in the D.D.I.'s office recalls receiving the speech.

A State of the Union address that was a call for war, that desperately needed to be vetted, had been misplaced and gone unread. "It is inconceivable to me that George Tenet didn't read that speech," says Milt Bearden. "At that point, he was effectively no longer D.C.I. [director of central intelligence]. He was part of that cabal, and no longer able to carry an honest message."

In an e-mail, a former intelligence official close to Tenet said the charge that Tenet was "part of a 'cabal' is absurd." The official added, "Mr. Tenet was unaware of attempts to put the Niger information in the State of the Union speech. Had he been aware, he would have vigorously tried to have it removed."

The next day, despite countless objections from the C.I.A. and other agencies, Bush cited the charges from the fraudulent Niger documents in his speech. Later that year, Stephen Hadley accepted responsibility for allowing the sentence to remain in the speech. He said he had failed to remember the warnings he'd received about the allegations.

Blaming the C.I.A.

In last-minute negotiations between the White House and the C.I.A., a decision was made to attribute the alleged Niger uranium deal to British intelligence. The official reason was that it was preferable to cite British intelligence, which Blair had championed in his 50-page report, rather than classified American intelligence. But the C.I.A. had told the White House again and again that it didn't trust the British reports.

The British, meanwhile, have repeatedly claimed to have other sources, but they have refused to identify them. According to Joseph Wilson, that refusal is a violation of the U.N. resolution stipulating that member states must share with the International Atomic Energy Agency all information they have on prohibited nuclear programs in Iraq. "The British say they cannot share the information, because it comes from a third-country intelligence source," says Wilson. "But that third country is presumably a member of the United Nations, and it too should comply with Article 10 of United Nations Resolution 1441." So far, Wilson says, no evidence of a third country has come to light.

A week after Bush's speech, on February 4, the Bush administration finally forwarded electronic copies of the Niger documents to the I.A.E.A. Astonishingly, a note was attached to the documents which said, "We cannot confirm these reports and have questions regarding some specific claims."

On March 7, the I.A.E.A. publicly exposed the Niger documents as forgeries. Not long afterward, Cheney was asked about it on *Meet the Press*. He said that the I.A.E.A. was wrong, that it had "consistently underestimated or missed what it was Saddam Hussein

was doing." He added, "We know [Saddam] has been absolutely devoted to trying to acquire nuclear weapons. And we believe he has, in fact, reconstituted nuclear weapons."

On March 14, Senator Jay Rockefeller IV, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, wrote a letter to F.B.I. chief Robert Mueller asking for an investigation because "the fabrication of these documents may be part of a larger deception campaign aimed at manipulating public opinion and foreign policy regarding Iraq." But Senator Pat Roberts, of Kansas, the Republican chair of the committee, declined to co-sign the letter.

Then, on March 19, 2003, the war in Iraq began.

On July 11, 2003, faced with public pressure to investigate the forgeries, Roberts issued a statement blaming the C.I.A. and defending the White House. "So far, I am very disturbed by what appears to be extremely sloppy handling of the issue from the outset by the C.I.A.," he said.

Under Roberts's aegis, the Senate Intelligence Committee investigated the Niger affair and came to some extraordinary conclusions. "At the time the President delivered the State of the Union address, no one in the IC [intelligence community] had asked anyone in the White House to remove the sentence from the speech," read the report. It added that "CIA Iraq nuclear analysts ... told Committee staff that at the time of the State of the Union, they still believed that Iraq was probably seeking uranium from Africa."

In November 2005, Rockefeller and Democratic senator Harry Reid staged a dramatic shutdown of the Senate and challenged Roberts to get to the bottom of the forgeries. "The fact is that at any time the Senate Intelligence Committee pursued a line of questioning that brought us close to the White House, our efforts were thwarted," Rockefeller said.

So far, the Republican-controlled Senate committee has failed to produce a more extensive report.

An Even Bigger Mistake

For his part, Michael Ledeen thinks all the interest in the Niger documents and Bush's famous 16 words is overblown. "I don't want my government's decisions based on falsehoods," he says. "But the president referred to British intelligence. So far as I've read about it, that statement is true."

Ledeen categorically asserts that he couldn't have orchestrated the Niger operation, because he disagreed so strongly with the administration's policy. "I thought it was wrong to do Iraq militarily," he says. "Before we went into Iraq, I said that anyone who thinks we can march into Iraq, overthrow Saddam, and then have peace is crazy. I thought it was a mistake at the time, and the way they did it." He adds, "Let's get real. This is politics. People in office do not like people who criticize them."

It is unclear how these assertions square with the widespread reports that Ledeen was tightly wired into the neocons in the administration; with his long history of ties to SISMI, as reported by *The Wall Street Journal* and the court records from the trial of Francesco Pazienza; and with Ledeen's own pro-war writings.

Despite all the speculation, there are no fingerprints connecting Ledeen to the Niger documents. Even his fiercest adversaries will concede this. "In talking to hundreds of people, no one has given us a hint linking Ledeen to the Niger documents," says Carlo Bonini of *La Repubblica*, which is facing a defamation suit by Ledeen in Italy.

It is also unclear what, if anything, the Italians may have received for their alleged participation in Nigergate. In 2005, a consortium led by Finmeccanica, the Italian arms company, and Lockheed Martin unexpectedly beat out U.S.-owned Sikorsky to win a contract to build presidential helicopters. Some saw the contract, worth as much as \$6.1 billion, as a reward to Berlusconi for helping Bush on Iraq.

Regardless of who fabricated the Niger documents, it is difficult to overstate the impact of the war they helped ignite. By May 18, 2006, the number of American fatalities was 2,448, while various methods of tracking American casualties put the number of wounded at between 18,000 and 48,000. At least 35,000 Iraqis have been killed. A new study by Columbia University economist Joseph E. Stiglitz, who won the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2001, and Harvard lecturer Linda Bilmes concludes that the total costs of the Iraq war could top \$2 trillion. That figure includes the long-term health-care costs for injured soldiers, the cost of higher oil prices, and a bigger U.S. budget deficit.

But the most important consequence of the Iraq war is its destabilization of the Middle East. If neoconservatives such as Ledeen and their critics agree on anything, it is that so far there has been only one real winner in the Iraq conflict: the fundamentalist mullahs in Iran. For decades, the two big threats in the Middle East—Iran and Iraq—had counterbalanced each other in a standoff that neutralized both. Yet the Bush administration, despite having declared Iran a member of the Axis of Evil, proceeded to attack its two biggest enemies, Afghanistan and Iraq. "Iran is unquestionably the biggest beneficiary of the war in Iraq," says Milt Bearden.

Perhaps it is not surprising that the Bush administration is now rattling its sabers against Iran, which has been flexing its muscles with a new nuclear program. As a result, according to a Zogby poll in May, 66 percent of Americans now see Iran as a threat to the U.S. Zbigniew Brzezinski, national-security adviser to President Carter, has argued that starting the Iraq war was a catastrophic strategic blunder, and that taking military action against Iran may be an even bigger mistake. "I think of war with Iran as the ending of America's present role in the world," he told *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius. "Iraq may have been a preview of that, but it's still redeemable if we get out fast. In a war with Iran, we'll get dragged down for 20 or 30 years. The world will condemn us. We will lose our position in the world."

To Michael Ledeen, however, Iran's ascendancy is just one more reason to expand the Iraq war to the "terror masters" of the Middle East. "I keep saying it over and over again to the point where I myself am bored," he says. "I have been screaming 'Iran, Iran, Iran, Iran' for five years. [Those in the Bush administration] don't have an Iran policy. Still don't have one. They haven't done fuck-all."

This is Craig Unger's third article for Vanity Fair. He is currently working on a book based on his article "American Rapture," which appeared in the December 2005 issue.