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Bush: CIA Approved State of Union Speech

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By TOM RAUM, Associated Press Writer

ENTEBBE, Uganda - President Bush ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) and his national security adviser on Friday put responsibility squarely on the CIA ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) for the president's erroneous claim in his State of the Union address that Iraq ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) tried to acquire nuclear material from Africa.



[AP Photo](#)

"I gave a speech to the nation that was cleared by the intelligence services," Bush told reporters in Uganda.

National security adviser Condoleezza Rice ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) was more direct, saying, "The CIA cleared the speech in its entirety."

If CIA Director George Tenet had concerns about the information, "these doubts were not communicated to the president," Rice said.

The deepening controversy has undermined administration efforts to quiet doubts about the president's justifications for going to war. The United States said military action was justified, in part, because Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, but no such weapons have been found.

The concerted White House offensive, following comments on Thursday from Secretary of State Colin Powell ([news](#) - [web sites](#)), raised new questions about the ability of Tenet, a holdover from the Clinton administration, to survive the controversy.

Rice said Tenet "absolutely" had the president's confidence.

Still, she expressed dismay that information on alleged attempts by Saddam Hussein ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) to buy uranium "yellowcake" from Niger — intelligence that turned out to be based on forged documents — had found its way into a major presidential speech after being vetted by the CIA. Yellowcake is a lightly processed form of uranium which requires further enrichment before it can be used in nuclear weapons."



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"If the director of central intelligence had said, 'take this out of the speech,' it would have been gone — without question," Rice said.

Rice talked with Tenet by phone shortly before meeting with reporters to tell him what she planned to say, according to several administration officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity. These officials said Tenet was sent a final version of the speech before it was delivered.

A spokesman for the CIA was unavailable for comment and did not return repeated calls from The Associated Press.

Tenet's tenure had seemed shaky at the outset of the Bush administration, but by all accounts he ingratiated himself to the president through loyalty, hard work, and by personally giving the president daily intelligence briefings. Still, administration officials privately suggested that the current controversy might be hard for Tenet to overcome.

Tenet has been further isolated by Secretary of State Colin Powell, who said Thursday that he had reservations about the information used in the speech and thus did not use it Feb. 5 in a speech to the U.N. Security Council in which he offered a detailed catalogue of alleged Iraqi transgressions.

Anxious to dispense with the controversy, which has dogged the president on his Africa trip, the White House took unusual steps Friday to make Rice available for questions. She spent nearly an hour going over allegations with reporters on Air Force One. And Bush responded to a reporter's shouted question at a picture-taking session even after his Ugandan host said no

questions would be allowed.

Asked how an erroneous piece of intelligence got into his speech and whether someone should be held accountable, Bush responded:

"I gave a speech to the nation that was cleared by the intelligence services. And it was a speech that detailed to the American people the dangers posed by the Saddam Hussein regime. And my government took the appropriate response to those dangers. And as a result, the world is going to be more secure and more peaceful."

Earlier this week, the White House acknowledged that it was a mistake for the information to be included in the speech. The administration's strong rebuttal on Friday came after several news organizations, including the AP, reported that U.S. intelligence officials had expressed doubts — before and after Bush claimed in January that Iraq was seeking uranium in Africa — over the basis for such a claim.

Bush in his State of the Union address had cited a British intelligence report as the basis for the information.

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British Prime Minister Tony Blair ([news](#) - [web sites](#)), who plans to meet with Bush at the White House on Thursday, also has faced intense questioning for his claims that Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction.

American intelligence officials told British officials their doubts about the purported Africa-Iraq uranium connection cited by Bush in his speech, some U.S. officials said.

But Rice said the CIA itself, as part of its regular classified National Intelligence Estimate to Bush, asserted that Iraq was "seeking yellowcake in Africa."

When the text of the speech was sent to the CIA for vetting, Rice said the agency raised only one objection to the sentence involving the Africa-Iraq-uranium allegation. "Some specifics about amount and place were taken out," Rice said, adding that "with the changes in that sentence, the speech was cleared."

On Capitol Hill, Sen. Pat Roberts ([news](#), [bio](#), [voting record](#)), R-Kan., chairman of the Senate intelligence committee, chastised the CIA, saying he's disturbed by what appears to be "extremely sloppy handling of the issue" by the agency.

He said unnamed intelligence sources are claiming they told the White House that the information was unfounded, yet he said he's been told that the CIA was still asserting about 10 days before Bush's speech that Iraq was seeking to acquire uranium from Africa.

"I have seen no documentation that indicates that the CIA had reversed itself after Jan. 17 and prior to the State of the Union," he said. "If the CIA had changed its position, it was incumbent on the director of intelligence to correct the record and bring it to the immediate attention of the president."

As the controversy continued this week, Democratic candidates for president have maintained a steady drumbeat questioning Bush's veracity.

On Friday, Sen. John Kerry ([news](#), [bio](#), [voting record](#)), D-Mass., said the ongoing controversy only strengthens the case for a full, honest accounting of any intelligence failures.

"The continued finger-pointing, charge-countercharge, and bureaucratic warfare within the administration do nothing to make this country safer and will simply further erode the confidence of the American public and our allies around the world," he said.

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