

White House 'lied about Saddam threat'

Julian Borger in Washington
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A former US intelligence official who served under the Bush administration in the build-up to the Iraq war accused the White House yesterday of lying about the threat posed by Saddam Hussein.

The claims came as the Bush administration was fighting to shore up its credibility among a series of anonymous government leaks over its distortion of US intelligence to manufacture a case against Saddam.

This was the first time an administration official has put his name to specific claims. The whistleblower, Gregory Thielmann, served as a director in the state department's bureau of intelligence until his retirement in September, and had access to the classified reports which formed the basis for the US case against Saddam, spelled out by President Bush and his aides.

Mr Thielmann said yesterday: "I believe the Bush administration did not provide an accurate picture to the American people of the military threat posed by Iraq."

He conceded that part of the problem lay with US intelligence, but added: "Most of it lies with the way senior officials misused the information they were provided."

As Democrats demanded a congressional enquiry, the administration sharply changed tack. The defence secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, told the Senate the US had not gone to war against Iraq because of fresh evidence of weapons of mass destruction but because Washington saw what evidence there was prior to 2001 "in a dramatic new light" after September 11.

At a press conference yesterday, Mr Thielmann said that, as of March 2003, when the US began military operations, "Iraq posed no imminent threat to either its neighbours or to the United States".

In one example, Mr Thielmann said a fierce debate inside the White House about the purpose of aluminium tubes bought by Baghdad had been "cloaked in ambiguity".

While some CIA analysts thought they could be used for gas centrifuges to enrich uranium, the best experts at the energy department disagreed. But the national security advisor, Condoleezza Rice, said publicly that they could only be used for centrifuges.

Mr Thielmann also said there was no significant pattern of cooperation between Iraq and al-Qaida. He added: "This administration has had a faith-based intelligence attitude ... 'We know the answers - give us the intelligence to support those answers'."

Responding to claims of deliberate distortions, Mr Bush accused his critics of "trying to rewrite history" and insisted "there is no doubt in my mind" that Saddam "was a threat to world peace".