

The Yellow Cake Scandal

By William R. Polk

Both the British and American governments are caught in a scandal of almost unprecedented dimensions. The way the scandal came about and the way it was treated by the two governments not only illuminate the events leading up to the Anglo-American attack on Iraq but also on the ways in which the two governments and English and American society differ. The “yellow cake” scandal is, in short, one of the most important events of recent years.

“Yellow cake” is the common name of uranium oxide which is a component of nuclear weapons. It is produced, among other places, in two mines (Somair and Cominak) in the west African state of Niger. Working those mines is an international consortium composed of French, Spanish, Japanese, German and Nigerian interests. They, in turn, are closely monitored by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to ensure that no dangerous materials are diverted to unauthorized parties.

This system has been in operation for a number of years, but in late 2001, a rumor circulated that an unauthorized party, the government of Iraq, was trying to buy yellow cake. In the shadowy world of espionage, it is still unclear who started the rumor. What is known is that some individuals or an organization forged documents to cast blame on Iraq.

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The documents were so crude that it is unlikely they were the work of a sophisticated intelligence service. The letterhead on one document was obviously

transplanted from some other, presumably genuine, paper; the signature of the president of Niger was copied; and, most telling of all, one signature was supposedly written by a minister who had been out of office for over a decade.

How these documents reached the British and American governments is also obscure. One story has them acquired by Italian agents and passed to the British intelligence agency (MI6) which, in turn, passed them to the CIA. After the furor they have caused, it is unlikely that anyone will ever step forward to admit responsibility for their transmission, much less for their drafting.

When the documents reached the CIA, officials apparently concluded that, despite their obvious faults, the subject they addressed was too important to be neglected. So, in early 2002, the CIA asked a retired American ambassador with 23 years of experience on African affairs (and who had been stationed in Niger in the 1970s) to investigate.

Ambassador Joseph Wilson, now a business consultant, agreed to fly to Niger to attempt to find out what was behind the story. When he arrived in Niamey, he consulted with the current US ambassador, Barbra Owens-Kirkpatrick, and the embassy staff for whom everything relating to uranium was top priority. They told him that the story was well known and that they had already “debunked” it in reports to Washington. Then, as Wilson said, “I spent the next eight days drinking sweet mint tea and meeting with dozens of people: current government officials, former government officials, people associated with the country’s uranium business.” They uniformly and formally “denied the charges.” The Embassy concurred.

Returning to Washington in early March 2002, Wilson reported to the CIA and to the Bureau of African Affairs of the Department of State that, although he had not been

shown the documents themselves, he was sure that “there’s simply too much oversight over too small an industry for a sale [outside controlled channels] to have transpired.” Too many people would have had to given approval and even more would have known about the diversion of uranium. Moreover, since it would have violated UN sanctions, a diversion would have attracted a great deal of notice. In short, he concluded, the transaction did not take place.

Mr. Wilson has revealed (in an “Op-Ed” piece in *The New York Times* on July 6, 2003) that “there should be at least four documents in United States government archives confirming my mission. The documents should include the ambassador’s report of my debriefing in Niamey, a separate report written by the embassy staff, a C.I.A. report summing up my trip, and a specific answer from the agency to the office of the vice president (this may have been delivered orally).”

The CIA has confirmed that its account of the matter was distributed to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Defense Intelligence Agency in the Pentagon, the Justice Department and the FBI and the office of Vice President Cheney.

His task, Ambassador Wilson concluded, had been accomplished: “the Niger matter was settled and [so I] went back to my life.”

Despite this negative report, however, senior officials of the Bush administration continued to stress the nuclear threat. In a speech in Nashville on August 26, 2002, Vice President Dick Cheney warned of a Saddam “armed with an arsenal of these weapons of terror’ who could ‘directly threaten America’s friends throughout the region and subject the United States or any other nation to nuclear blackmail.”

The next month, in September 2002, Ambassador Wilson was surprised to learn that the British government had published a “dossier” or white paper on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction that included the yellow cake story. Assuming that this meant that the CIA had not shared with MI6 the results of his investigation, Wilson called his contact at the CIA to suggest that he warn his British counterparts that the materials were a hoax.

Wilson assumed that there was another source for the speech President Bush made on October 7 in Cincinnati in which he warned that “The Iraqi dictator must not be permitted to threaten America and the world with horrible poisons and diseases and gasses and atomic weapons.” But then, on January 28 2003, he was astonished to hear President George W. Bush in 2003 State of the Union address pin his warnings on Saddam Husain’s possession of atomic weapons to the Yellow Cake story. Bush declared that “the British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa.”

To make its case at the United Nations, the American government turned over the yellow cake documents to the Security Council. When they were examined by the IAEA, its director, Mohamed El-Baradei, informed the Security Council that they were fake.

How could the American government not have known? Condoleezza Rice, director of the staff of the National Security Council, replied on “Meet the Press.” “Maybe someone knew down in the bowels of the [Central Intelligence] agency, but no one in our circles knew that there were doubts and suspicions that this might be a forgery.”

At least as early as early February 2003, all the decision makers in the Bush administration as well as the general public knew that at least this part of the rationale for

the invasion of Iraq was based on forged documents, but this did nothing to deter the American military onslaught.

Almost more astonishing, as late as June 25, 2003, the British government was still insisting in Parliament that it stood by reports that Iraq had been trying to buy Yellow Cake. Finally, on July 7, the White House acknowledged that the story was a hoax.

Did that end the story? Not according to critics of the Bush administration. As some have pointed out, when President Bill Clinton lied about an illicit sex affair, he was subjected to a major investigation by half a hundred lawyers and was nearly impeached. President Nixon had been forced to resign over the Watergate break-in and President Reagan had been closely questioned over the Iran-Contra scandal, that is “what he knew and when he knew it.” Important as these were, they pale to insignificance in comparison to launching a war in which thousands – estimates run to about 40,000 -- Iraqis were killed, lives were disrupted and damage to physical facilities amounted to tens of billions of dollars. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of young American men and women had their lives disrupted and were put in “harm’s way” while the country initially spent nearly \$100 billion and is committed to far larger outlays to repair what it destroyed.

The justification for all this was that Iraq was arming itself for an attack on America. The documents, including the yellow cake story, have one by one fall apart when examined. If this was a result of incompetent analysis, it is a scandal; if, the result of deliberate misleading of the public, it would be what the U.S. Constitution terms a “high crime and misdemeanor.” It is unlikely that many in America or Britain will accept as the last word White House spokesman Ari Fleischer’s flippant dismissal as the

President took off for Africa on July 7, of the scandal: “There is zero, nada, nothing new here...we’ve long acknowledged [that the story] “did, indeed, turn out to be incorrect.”

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