In 2003, he made the case for invading Iraq to halt its weapons programs. The analysts who provided the intelligence now say it was doubted inside the C.I.A. at the time.

By Robert Draper

Published July 16, 2020    Updated Oct. 19, 2021

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Early one morning in August 2002, Jack Straw, the British foreign minister at the time, drove with a small entourage to a beach house in East Hampton on Long Island. The house belonged to the billionaire Ronald Lauder, who for most of August was hosting his good friend and Straw’s American counterpart, Colin Powell.

The foreign minister and the secretary of state had become extraordinarily close over the previous year. Powell’s customary 11 p.m. calls to the Straw household had prompted Straw’s wife to refer to him as “the other man in my life.” The August meeting at the Lauder residence, Powell would later say, was an attempt to answer a question: “Could we both stop a war?”

For nearly a year — since just a few days after the Sept. 11 attacks — Powell had watched as the idea of invading Iraq, once the preoccupation of a handful of die-hards in other corners of the Bush administration, took on increasingly undeniable momentum. Powell thought such an invasion would be disastrous — and yet the prospect had for months seemed so preposterous to Powell and his deputies at the State Department that he assumed it would burn out of its own accord.
But by that August, it had become evident to Powell that he was not winning the argument. On Monday, Aug. 5, a couple of weeks before the meeting in East Hampton, he and Condoleezza Rice, President George W. Bush’s national security adviser, joined Bush for dinner at the White House residence. For two hours, Rice said little while Powell proceeded to do what no one else in the Bush administration had done or would do: tell the president to his face that things in Iraq could go horribly wrong. “If you break it, you own it,” he famously told Bush. “This will become your first term.”

As they sat on the veranda of the beach house, Powell recounted the dinner meeting to Straw. “I told him, ‘Removing Saddam is the easy part,’” he said. “You’ll be the proud owner of 25 million Iraqis in 18 fractious provinces.’” They talked for three hours. Powell spoke ruefully of Vice President Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld — men he had known for years, both of whom had changed, he told Straw, and not for the better.

Straw listened sympathetically. He shared Powell’s views on the folly of invasion. His own boss, Prime Minister Tony Blair, professed a commitment to regime change in Iraq, but one that was orderly and supported by other countries in the West as well as in the Arab world. Such a coalition, achieved through the passage of a United Nations resolution, might persuade Saddam Hussein to comply with weapons inspectors and avoid military confrontation. But Blair’s attempts to deliver this message to Bush were not getting through, in part because the prime minister was not terribly forceful in delivering it. Straw was plainly frustrated with Blair, who he feared was becoming Bush’s enabler. Powell pressed him to keep trying. “You’ve got to get Tony to convince the president to go to the U.N.,” he said.

The day after he returned to London, Straw warned Blair that he should not dismiss the prospect of Bush’s unilaterally taking his country to war. “You have to take this seriously,” the foreign minister said, “because there are contrary voices. Cheney and Rumsfeld are in a different place. We haven’t landed this yet.” Powell was Blair’s ally in this cause, but Straw could see that the secretary of state was only a single voice in Bush’s ear, and not necessarily the one that counted.
As it turned out, the secretary’s voice was the most prescient in the Bush administration. And yet Powell’s “you break it, you own it” warning to the president would be overshadowed by the fact that he was also the war’s most effective salesman. The sale had been made in a speech before the United Nations on Feb. 5, 2003: a methodical recitation of the American intelligence agencies’ findings on Iraq’s weapons program demonstrating the urgency of putting an end to it, by invasion if necessary. It was precisely the secretary of state’s skepticism about the wisdom of war that made him the Bush White House’s indispensable pitchman for it. Alone among the president’s war council, the four-star general was seen by Republicans and Democrats, the news media and the public as a figure of unassailable credibility. If Powell said Hussein presented an immediate danger to the United States, then surely it was so.

The speech remains one of the most indelible public moments of the Bush presidency. By the time Powell resigned from his post, his performance that morning before the U.N. Security Council had come to symbolize the tragic recklessness of Bush’s decision to go to war. Iraq, it was by then widely understood, had played no role in the Sept. 11 attacks, nor did it possess weapons of mass destruction. Nearly all the intelligence Powell presented to the world in his speech turned out to be false.
With the benefit of 15 years of hindsight, it’s possible to see Powell’s U.N. speech as a signal event in the broader story of American governance. It is Exhibit A for the argument that would help propel Donald Trump to the White House in 2016 — that the U.S. government was not on the level, that the “establishment” figures of both parties were at once fools and manipulators. In June, when Powell told CNN that he would be voting for Joe Biden in November, Trump shot back on Twitter: “Didn’t Powell say that Iraq had ‘weapons of mass destruction?’ They didn’t, but off we went to WAR!”

Because of its long shadow, the U.N. speech invites one of the Bush presidency’s most poignant what-ifs. What if that same voice that publicly proclaimed the necessity of invading Iraq had instead told Bush privately that it was not merely an invitation to unintended consequences but a mistake, as he personally believed it to be? What if he had said no to Bush when he asked him to speak before the U.N.? Powell would almost certainly have been obligated to resign, and many if not all of his top staff members involved in the Iraq issue would also have quit; several had already considered doing so the previous summer.
If the State Department’s top team had emptied out their desks, what would Powell’s close friend Straw have done? “If Powell had decided to resign in advance of the Iraq war,” Straw told me, “I would almost certainly have done so, too.” Blair’s support in the Labour Party would have cratered — and had Blair withdrawn his support for war under pressure from Parliament or simply failed to win an authorization vote, the narrative of collapsed momentum would have dominated the news coverage for weeks. Doubters in the upper ranks of the American military — there were several — would have been empowered to speak out; intelligence would have been re-examined; Democrats, now liberated from the political pressures of the midterm elections, would most likely have joined the chorus.

This domino effect required a first move by Bush’s secretary of state. “But I knew I didn’t have any choice,” Powell told me. “What choice did I have? He’s the president.”

“I’m sort of not the resigning type,” Straw said. “Nor is Powell. And that’s the problem.”

In August 2018, in the course of researching a book on the lead-up to the Iraq war, I went to see Powell at the office in Alexandria, Va., that he has maintained since leaving the Bush administration in early 2005. Powell, who is now 83, is as proud and blunt-speaking as he was during his career in public service. Over the course of our two hourlong conversations, he made clear that he was all too aware of the lonely turf he was destined to occupy in history.

It was not the turf that anyone, least of all Powell himself, would have imagined for him in 2001. He entered the Bush administration as a four-star general of immense popularity and political influence. He left it four years later, discarded by Bush in favor of a more like-minded chief diplomat, Condoleezza Rice. He mournfully predicted to others that his obituary’s first paragraph would include his authorship of the U.N. speech.

In the decade and a half since then, Powell’s world and Bush’s have intersected only at the margins. The secretary takes pains not to speak ill of the president he once served, even when he announced in 2008 that he would be supporting Barack Obama as Bush’s successor. He was on hand for the opening of Bush’s
presidential library in 2013. But he has not attended the administration’s annual alumni gatherings, and since leaving office he has refused to defend Bush’s legacy-defining decision to invade Iraq.

On the one other occasion I interviewed Powell, while gathering material for a book about Bush’s presidency in 2006, he was wary and did not wish to speak on the record; it was a time of chaos in Iraq, and of score-settling memoirs in Washington. A dozen years later, however, that caginess had mostly fallen away. Some of the core mysteries that still hung over the most consequential American foreign-policy decision in a half-century, I found, remained mysteries even to Powell. At one point during our first conversation in 2018, he paraphrased a line about Iraq’s supposed weapons of mass destruction from the intelligence assessment that had informed his U.N. speech, which intelligence officials had assured him was rock solid: “‘We judge that they have 100 to 500 metric tons of chemical weapons, all produced within the last year.’ How could they have known that?” he said with caustic disbelief.

I told Powell I intended to track down the authors of that assessment. Smirking, he replied, “You might tell them I’m curious about it.”

Not long after meeting Powell, I did manage to speak to several analysts who helped produce the classified assessment of Iraq’s supposed weapons program and who had not previously talked with reporters. In fact, I learned, there was exactly zero proof that Hussein had a chemical-weapons stockpile. The C.I.A. analysts knew only that he once had such a stockpile, before the 1991 Persian Gulf war, and that it was thought to be as much as 500 metric tons before the weapons were destroyed. The analysts had noted what seemed to be recent suspicious movement of vehicles around suspected chemical-weapons plants. There also seemed to be signs — though again, no hard proof — that Iraq had an active biological-weapons program, so, they reasoned, the country was probably manufacturing chemical weapons as well. This was, I learned, typical of the prewar intelligence estimates: They amounted to semi-educated guesses built on previous and seldom-challenged guesses that always assumed the worst and imagined deceptiveness in everything the Iraqi regime did. The analysts knew not to present these judgments as facts. But that distinction had become lost by the time Powell spoke before the U.N.
Moreover, a circular reasoning guided the intelligence community’s prewar estimates. As an intelligence official — one of many who spoke to me on the condition of anonymity — said: “We knew where we were headed, and that was war. Which ironically made it that much more difficult to change the analytic line that we’d stuck with for 10 years. For 10 years, it was our pretty strong judgment that Saddam had chemical capability.” Whether or not this was still true, “with American soldiers about to go in, we weren’t going to change our mind and say, ‘Never mind.’”

“I am capable of self-pity,” Powell wrote in “My American Journey,” his 1995 memoir. “But not for long.” In his ascent to chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under President George H.W. Bush, the Harlem-born son of Jamaican immigrants had prevailed over racism, hard-ass generals in the Army and right-wingers who found him insufficiently hawkish. His appointment by Bush and Cheney, then the secretary of defense, also turned out to be a stroke of political genius. During the gulf war, his poise and resolve on television rallied Americans leery of foreign entanglements after the horror of Vietnam. It was thoroughly unsurprising when Bush’s son appointed Powell his secretary of state.

But their relationship was fraught from the start. Bush was not at all like his father, whom Powell had greatly admired. The new president was far more conservative, far less reverential of international alliances. Bush also understood the power that Powell’s popularity conferred on him, and he knew that Powell, who had once considered and decided against running for president, could change his mind anytime he wished.

And when it came to policy in the Middle East, Powell was not where the rest of Bush’s team was. He was, as a top National Security Council staff member who respected Powell would recall, “more of a dissident, who,” as the administration drifted steadily toward confrontation with Hussein, “would say, ‘I’m fighting a rear-guard action against these [expletive] crazies.’”

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Recalling the chaotic days after the Sept. 11 attacks, Powell told me, “The American people wanted somebody killed.” Bush himself confessed to a gathering of religious leaders in the Oval Office on the afternoon of Sept. 20, “I’m having difficulty controlling my bloodlust.” For Powell, it was plain at the time that the “somebody” deserving to be killed was Osama bin Laden, along with his network and the Taliban government in Afghanistan that had given him haven. When Bush and the rest of his senior foreign-policy team gathered at Camp David four days after the attacks, Powell argued that the world would support such a mission — but that a global coalition would fall apart if the U.S. began attacking other countries.

Rumsfeld archly replied: “Then maybe it’s not a coalition worth having.” Rumsfeld argued that a “global war on terror” should in fact be global. This was not an academic argument. A number of voices inside the administration had for years before the Sept. 11 attacks viewed Hussein as a principal sponsor of radical Palestinian groups and now maintained that any counterterrorism effort worth its salt necessarily encompassed Iraq. These figures were concentrated in Rumsfeld’s Pentagon and in Cheney’s office. They included Rumsfeld’s deputy, Paul Wolfowitz; the under secretary of defense for policy, Douglas Feith; Scooter Libby, Cheney’s chief of staff; and Cheney himself.

At Camp David, Wolfowitz went so far as to argue that Hussein was most likely behind the Sept. 11 attacks. Iraq was “the head of the snake,” he contended, and should be America’s primary target. Powell thought the deputy secretary of defense’s logic was absurd. But, he noted, Bush did not dismiss it outright, saying instead, “OK, we’ll leave Iraq for later.”

Bush was true to his word. On Oct. 7, the president announced the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom, a military attack on Al Qaeda and the Taliban. His administration’s policy focused on Afghanistan throughout the final months of 2001. But while spending Thanksgiving with Army troops at Fort Campbell in Kentucky, the president proclaimed, “Afghanistan is just the beginning of the war on terror.”

A month later, Bush was briefed by Gen. Tommy Franks of U.S. Central Command on a possible plan for invading Iraq. And a month after that, on Jan. 29, 2002, the president delivered his State of the Union address branding Iraq,
Iran and North Korea the Axis of Evil. “Iraq,” he told Congress, “continues to flaunt its hostility towards America and to support terror.”

Throughout early 2002, the Iraq debate played out largely in the National Security Council cabinet-level meetings known as the Principals Committee. Powell advocated the approach championed by Blair and Straw: have Bush go to the U.N. and press for a resolution condemning Hussein. Rumsfeld was adamant that the United States should not be slowed down by coalition-building. The interagency gatherings often descended into face-to-face bickering between the two sides, quarrels that spilled over into bureaucratic back alleys. Skilled infighter though he was, Powell was plainly frustrated by what one Principals Committee attendee described as “Don’s style, this Socratic asking of questions rather than tell you where he stood.”

Rumsfeld was not Powell’s only rival in the room. Cheney had a history with both men. He owed his career to Rumsfeld, whose coattails had carried him from the Office of Economic Opportunity to the Ford White House in 1974. And as the elder Bush’s defense secretary, Cheney watched attentively as his Joint Chiefs chairman hoovered up publicity. That had been useful during the gulf war, up to a point. But Powell had also offered unsolicited policymaking advice to the White House and off-the-cuff troop-downsizing estimates to the press. Cheney — a figure of legendary discretion whose Secret Service code name at one time was Back Seat — had come to believe that Colin Powell was playing for Colin Powell.

In the Principals Committee meetings, men who had known one another for decades could no longer disguise their ill feelings. At the beginning of one meeting, Richard Armitage, Powell’s deputy secretary, genially offered the vice president some coffee. Cheney smiled. “Rich,” Armitage recalled him replying, “if you gave it to me, I’d have to have a taster.”

As one of Powell’s subordinates put it: “The secretary and Armitage thought we could get by with a rope-a-dope approach: Let’s play along. Let them hang themselves. Because this idea is so cockamamie, it’ll never happen.” Of Hussein, “Powell kept saying, ‘He’s a bad guy in a box, so let’s keep building the box,’” another one of his deputies recalled. “And he hoped that over time, the president might say: ‘Ah, OK, I get it. The box is good.’”
But by the summer of 2002, this argument was clearly losing ground. One morning that summer, Powell’s under secretary of state for political affairs, Marc Grossman, called Libby’s deputy, Eric Edelman. The two had traveled in the same foreign-policy circles for decades, but their collegiality had begun to fray over Iraq. So Edelman was surprised when Grossman said, “I’d like to meet with you on some kind of neutral territory.” They chose the coffee shop in the basement of the Corcoran Gallery.

Once they were seated, Grossman got right to the point. “Eric,” Edelman recalled him asking, “has the president already decided to go to war, and we’re just in this interagency circle jerk?”

“I don’t think the president has decided to go to war,” Edelman replied. “But I do think the president has decided the problem Saddam presents can’t just drag on forever.”

Just hours before Powell joined Bush for dinner on Aug. 5, General Franks briefed Bush on what would become the final war plan for invading Iraq. Still, Powell could see that his grim prophecy to the president — “this will become your first term” — registered. “What should I do?” Bush asked.

Go to the United Nations, Powell advised him. After all, Hussein had violated numerous U.N. resolutions regarding his weapons program, aggression toward Kuwait and treatment of his own people. The U.N. was the aggrieved party. But if he were to do so, Powell added, there was a chance that Hussein would surrender his weapons. Bush would have to accept a changed regime as a substitute for regime change.

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It was arguably the most important message that Bush would hear from any of his subordinates in his entire presidency — and, in what Powell left out of the message, the most important missed opportunity. When Bush asked, “What should I do?” his secretary of state could have spoken his mind and said, “Don’t invade Iraq.” But he didn’t.

Perhaps the most tireless lobbyist for invasion in 2002 was a smooth-talking Iraqi expatriate named Ahmad Chalabi. The leader of the Iraqi National Congress, an aspiring government in exile, Chalabi had for years been feeding sympathetic policymakers and journalists a utopian vision of what a post-Hussein democratic Iraq might look like. On the veranda in East Hampton, Powell complained to Straw that Wolfowitz, Feith, Cheney and Libby were hopelessly smitten with Chalabi. “You wouldn’t believe how much this guy is shaping our policy,” he told Straw.

Chalabi had also been vigorously disseminating intelligence seeking to tie Hussein to Al Qaeda. Cheney, Libby, Wolfowitz and Feith found his evidence on this subject to be persuasive. By contrast, Powell’s team found it highly unlikely that Hussein would consort with Islamic terrorists who despised the secular Iraqi regime.

George Tenet, the director of the C.I.A., broadly agreed with Powell on the administration hawks’ intelligence — so it was at first glance mystifying that the U.S. intelligence community, by the summer of 2002, was providing the most convincing arguments for going to war. Tenet had by then come to believe that Bush’s mind was made up about overthrowing Hussein, even as the president continued to maintain otherwise. Some who worked with Tenet — a Clinton holdover whose agency’s work was repeatedly criticized by Rumsfeld and others — thought he fretted that the White House would come to see him as unhelpful and proceed to disregard the C.I.A.’s assessments altogether. “Here we had this precious access,” recalled one of Tenet’s senior analysts, “and he didn’t want to blow it.”
Sometime in May 2002, Bush received a Presidential Daily Briefing from the C.I.A. that included perhaps the most alarming intelligence about Iraq that he had yet heard. National Security Agency intercepts had picked up communications between an Iraqi general and an Iraqi procurement agent who was based in Australia. The general had directed the procurement agent to buy equipment for Iraq’s unmanned aerial vehicles program. In the spring of 2002, the agent had given an Australian equipment distributor his shopping list. Among the items was Garmin GPS software that included maps of major American cities.

Alarmed, the distributor contacted the authorities. This P.D.B. presented Bush with the first intelligence appearing to confirm his nightmare scenario: Hussein intended to attack the United States. This marked a turning point for Bush, according to one of his senior advisers. “We get this report about, They’ve bought this software that’s supposed to be mapping the United States. He’s hearing this intel, and the diplomacy is going nowhere. And so I think that’s when he really starts thinking, I’ve got to get something done in Iraq.”

As it happened, there was a more innocent explanation for the mapping software. Two C.I.A. analysts and an Australian intelligence officer eventually brought the Iraqi procurement agent in for questioning and confronted him about the American maps. The Iraqi was stunned. He said it was the Garmin hardware he had been interested in. The only reason he bought the mapping software, he said, was because he thought the hardware wouldn’t work without it. The presentation on the vendor’s web page seemed to confirm this account.

But this revelation, like others tempering the most dire view of Iraq’s capabilities, was swept aside by the self-compounding momentum toward war. In a speech in Cincinnati in October 2002, Bush likened America’s confrontation with Hussein to World War II — an indicator that the president could not foresee a diplomatic outcome.

In early December, word reached the C.I.A. that the White House wanted it to prepare an oral presentation on Iraq’s weapons program that would feature an “Adlai Stevenson moment” — referring to the 1962 episode in which the U.S. ambassador to the U.N. presented open-and-shut photographic evidence of Soviet ballistic-missile installations in Cuba. The timing of the request seemed odd, given that Hans Blix, the U.N.’s chief weapons inspector, and his team
were already in Iraq and would presumably be furnishing on-the-ground visual proof of Hussein’s arsenal, if it existed, any day now. The fact that such a presentation was being ordered up was tantamount to a White House vote of no confidence in Blix.

The presentation was referred to internally at the C.I.A. as the Case. That Tenet did not resist the request suggested that the agency had crossed a red line. “The first thing they teach you in C.I.A. 101 is you don’t help them make the case,” said an agency official who was involved in the project. “But we were all infected in the case for war.”
The task of supervising the intelligence on Iraq’s weapons program fell largely to Tenet’s deputy director, John McLaughlin. McLaughlin was a beloved figure among the agency’s analysts. As measured and even-tempered as Tenet was mercurial, he wore natty suspenders but was otherwise a by-the-book professional who pored over classified documents with a ruler, sliding it slowly downward line by line. He enjoyed performing sleight-of-hand coin tricks, which earned him the code name Merlin from the C.I.A. security detail.

McLaughlin met with the agency’s analytical team headed by Bob Walpole, the national intelligence officer for strategic programs. The deputy director told the analysts that the White House had asked for their best story on Iraq. The analysts sent up what visuals they had.

McLaughlin reviewed them with astonishment. “This is all there is?” he asked when they convened again. He also asked them, “Do we have any slam-dunk evidence of W.M.D.?”

Larry Fox, a senior chemical-weapons analyst, did not watch basketball. He asked McLaughlin what “slam dunk” meant.

“Like a smoking gun,” the deputy director explained. “Undeniable. Caught red-handed.”

“Ah,” Fox said. “Well, no. We don’t have any.”

For the next two weeks, several analysts fine-tuned the presentation. On Friday afternoon, Dec. 20, McLaughlin stood in Rumsfeld’s conference room at the Pentagon before a group that included Wolfowitz, Feith and Franks and recited the Case. Rumsfeld and his team were polite but visibly unimpressed. They asked few questions.

The following morning, McLaughlin and his colleagues were sent to the Oval Office for a repeat performance, accompanied by Tenet, for a gathering that included Bush, Cheney, Rice and Libby. “This is a rough draft — it’s still in development,” McLaughlin began. For the next 20 or so minutes, McLaughlin spoke almost entirely uninterrupted. It was a smoother performance than his briefing the day before at the Pentagon. Bush and the others listened intently. But a thick silence settled in after he finished. “Again, this is a first draft,” Tenet assured the president.
“Nice try,” the president said to McLaughlin. He did not appear to mean it sarcastically. Bush expressed his concern clearly, according to notes taken by an attendee: “Look, in about five weeks I may have to ask the fathers and mothers of America to send their sons and daughters off to war. This has to be well developed.” He emphasized the need to make the case to “the average citizen. So it needs to be more convincing. Probably needs some better examples.”

It was clear to everyone in the room that Bush had already made up his mind about the Iraqi threat. The only question to him was whether the C.I.A. had what it took to convince the public that the threat justified war. “Maybe have a lawyer look at how to lay out the structure of the argument,” Bush continued. “Maybe someone with Madison Avenue experience should look at the presentation.” He added, “And it needs to tie all this into terrorism, for the domestic audience.”

The president asked Tenet whether his agency could build a more convincing case. It was to that question — not, as often reported, a question relating to whether Hussein posed a threat — that the C.I.A. director infamously replied: “Slam dunk.”

McLaughlin tried again. He instructed Bob Walpole to make the Case more persuasive. “Give me everything you’ve got,” Walpole in turn told his weapons team, according to one of the analysts. “Never mind sourcing or other problems.” He wanted the kitchen sink.

On Dec. 28, Walpole and McLaughlin went to the White House to discuss the Case with Rice. Just a couple of minutes into his summary, Rice stopped him. “Bob?” she said with evident concern. “If these are just assertions, we need to know this now.”

“They’re analytical assessments,” Walpole replied. “The agencies have attached confidence levels to them.”

Rice studied her copy, frowning. “What’s ‘high confidence’?” she asked. “About 90 percent?”

“About that,” he said.
The national security adviser gaped at Walpole and McLaughlin. “Well,” she finally said, “that’s a heck of a lot lower than what the P.D.B.s are saying!”

The chemical and biological weapons cases were based on inference, Walpole conceded. The nuclear case, he said, was “the weakest.” Rice turned to McLaughlin. “You have gotten the president way out on a limb on this,” she said. Walpole — who personally thought that invading Iraq made absolutely no sense — nonetheless could see that the administration wouldn’t be satisfied with a case that was built only on deceptions and shady activity. He wrote to his analysts, “We must make a public case that ‘Iraq HAS WMDs.’”

Unknown to Walpole’s team, a parallel process was underway in the Office of the Vice President. Immediately after the Dec. 21 meeting in the Oval Office, Cheney had said privately to Bush, “You know, Scooter’s already been working on something we could use.” Two days later, Libby called Edelman, his deputy, and told him about McLaughlin’s weak presentation. “The president doesn’t think it’s nearly persuasive enough,” Cheney’s chief of staff said. “And so they’ve given O.V.P. the assignment of redoing that.”

The next morning, Cheney’s staff got to work on their alternative presentation. John Hannah, Cheney’s assistant for national security affairs, was tasked with the section on biological, chemical and nuclear weapons. Libby had instructed his Middle East specialist to put every damning bit of raw intelligence he could find into his brief. The burden would then be on the C.I.A. analysts to argue why any of it should be thrown out.

On Saturday, Jan. 25, Libby gave a preview of the new presentation in the Situation Room. The audience included Rice, Wolfowitz, Armitage and Stephen Hadley, the deputy national security adviser. More notable, the political side of the White House — including Karl Rove, Bush’s longtime adviser, and Dan Bartlett, his communications director — was now hearing the intelligence case against Hussein for the very first time.

Wolfowitz thought Cheney’s chief of staff had done a great job. Rove found much to admire about it as well. Because many in the group were communications specialists, the conversation quickly moved on from the intelligence to the matter of its delivery. “I recall the general sense was, Who would be the best person to make this case at the U.N.?” Rove told me. “And the obvious answer was Colin Powell, chief diplomat.”
“Are you with me on this?” Bush asked Powell. The two were alone in the Oval Office on Jan. 13, 2003. “I think I have to do this. I want you with me.”

Powell had cautioned Bush a few months earlier about the consequences of invading Iraq, and he had gone further in private conversations with others, saying he thought the idea of going to war was foolish on its face. But the secretary of state had never expressed this outright opposition to the president. And although Powell would not admit it, Bush’s request that he be the one to make the case against Hussein to the U.N. was enormously flattering.

Even Cheney had explicitly acknowledged that Powell was the right man for the job. As the secretary told one of his top aides: “The vice president said to me: ‘You’re the most popular man in America. Do something with that popularity.’” But, Powell added to his aide, he wasn’t sure he could say no to Bush anyway. “There’s only so many times I can go toe to toe with the V.P.,” he said. “The more I think about it, the more I realize it’s important to keep the job.”

Once the decision was made that Powell would deliver the U.N. speech, he was handed the text that Libby’s team had prepared. Powell viewed the document suspiciously. Among the first things he noticed about Libby’s text were the lurid intimations about Hussein’s supposed ties with bin Laden’s organization. “You guys really believe all this [expletive]?” he scoffed to one of Cheney’s deputies. After first scrapping the entire section dealing with Iraq’s alleged ties to Al Qaeda, the secretary tasked Carl Ford, the director of the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research (I.N.R.), with reviewing the speech’s claims on biological, chemical and nuclear weapons.

Ford’s staff worked overnight. Their memo of objections to Hannah’s weapons section on Jan. 31 came to six single-spaced pages and cited at least 38 items that were deemed either “weak” or “unsubstantiated.” The I.N.R. analysts warned that Iraq’s alleged chemical-weapon decontamination trucks could simply be water trucks. Libby’s team had claimed that a shipment of aluminum tubes that the C.I.A. had intercepted on its way to Iraq in 2001 was intended for use in uranium-enrichment centrifuges (a claim that was leaked to The New York Times). The I.N.R. analysts maintained that the tubes were
for rocket launchers. Three of the critique’s most common phrases were “plausibility open to question,” “highly questionable” and “draft states it as fact.”

Meanwhile, Powell’s chief of staff, Col. Lawrence Wilkerson, was also hashing out the text on weapons with Hannah. The sources in the text weren’t footnoted, and Wilkerson grimaced as he watched Hannah fumble through his binders. After one query, Hannah produced a New York Times article as his source. Between I.N.R.’s factual objections and Hannah’s halting command of the material, Powell was fast losing faith in the work by Libby’s team. He instructed Wilkerson to start from scratch.

It was George Tenet who came to the rescue, Powell later said. Tenet suggested that he base the new speech on the National Intelligence Estimate relating to Iraq’s weapons capability that had been thrown together in less than three weeks the previous September. It was, after all, the consensus product of the American intelligence community. What could go wrong?

For the next three days, Powell, dressed in jeans, sat in Tenet’s conference room on the seventh floor in C.I.A. headquarters with his speechwriting team. Line by line, data point by data point, the secretary read out the text and then asked: “Does that sound right? What’s the source on this? Opposition? Kurdish? Asylum seeker? Can we trust him?” If the answer did not suit him, Powell’s reply would be: “I’m not comfortable with that. Throw it on the floor.”

To the outside observer, the process seemed methodical and professional. Dan Bartlett dropped by the C.I.A. over the weekend. “Everybody’s in the room,” Bartlett recalled. “He’s got their undivided attention. This is going to be done right. I left thinking, OK, I feel good about this.”

Powell had reason to feel sanguine about the process as well. Tenet was there, along with McLaughlin and the aluminum tube he had taken to carrying as a prop, which at one point he rolled across the conference-room table. Whenever Powell seemed concerned about a particular claim, Tenet’s staff would usher in what seemed to be the proper analyst to affirm the source’s validity.

What Powell did not know was that there were other C.I.A. officials not present in the conference room who seriously doubted much of the National Intelligence Estimate’s contents. This was particularly evident on the subject
of Hussein’s biological-weapons capabilities. Some of the most arresting visuals in the Case — the only ones that seemed to catch the attention of the Pentagon officials during McLaughlin’s early rehearsal of the C.I.A.’s presentation — were photographs of a vehicle believed to be an Iraqi mobile biological-weapons lab. Its description had been supplied by a former Iraqi chemical engineer code-named Curveball, who had made his way to Germany in 1999, seeking asylum and in exchange offering spectacular details about Iraq’s weapons program. “The really strong stuff was Curveball,” remembered Bill McLaughlin, a C.I.A. military analyst (and no relation to John McLaughlin) who was in the conference room on Saturday, Feb. 3. “It was the kind of specificity we needed to show. It was the centerpiece of the discussion.”

But Curveball’s claims to have been part of a mobile biological-weapons program had also polarized the agency. The American intelligence community still did not have access to the source himself. “We don’t have a case officer in touch with this guy,” Tenet had once muttered to his staff. Though many analysts at the C.I.A. considered the Iraqi engineer credible, the agency’s Directorate of Operations officers, who dealt firsthand with informants, believed they knew a liar when they saw one. In Curveball, they saw a liar.

In December, John McLaughlin asked his executive assistant, Stephen Slick, to (as Slick would put it) “get to the bottom of a disagreement within the building about the veracity of one human source.” Tyler Drumheller, the chief of the directorate’s European division, instructed Margaret Henoch, the division’s chief of the group of countries that included Germany, to “look into Curveball.” Referring to the directorate’s deputy director, Jim Pavitt, he added, “Pavitt wants him to be vetted, because apparently we’re going to use him to justify going into Iraq.”

Henoch’s staff’s discussions with German intelligence agents led them to conclude that Curveball was not on the level. On Dec. 19, Henoch argued this point to Slick. To a chief biological-weapons analyst in the room who had fervently believed Curveball’s claims, Henoch said: “You guys are trained to write papers. You write to prove a thesis, rather than evaluating the information. And I think that’s what you’ve done here.”
Henoch was overruled; a day later, Slick issued his opinion that the intelligence community had conducted an “exhaustive review” of Curveball and “judged him credible.” But Slick later acknowledged that there was “not much more” to the biological-weapons case than Curveball.

When another C.I.A. analyst expressed concern about Curveball to a deputy on the weapons of mass destruction task force, the deputy’s email response began, “Let’s keep in mind the fact that this war’s going to happen regardless of what Curveball said or didn’t say, and that the Powers That Be probably aren’t terribly interested in whether Curveball knows what he’s talking about.” Pavitt, too, conveyed to a colleague that war was inevitable and that those against it could “tap dance nude on Pennsylvania Avenue and it would make no difference.”

McLaughlin would later insist that he was unaware that doubts had been expressed about Curveball’s veracity. Still, before Powell was to deliver his U.N. speech, the deputy director instructed Slick to check on Curveball’s “current status/whereabouts.” Slick’s memo to Drumheller on Feb. 3 said, “A great deal of effort is being expended to vet the intelligence that underlies SecState’s upcoming U.N. presentation.”

But the memo made no mention of a cable that had been sent to the agency’s headquarters a week before by the C.I.A.’s chief of station in Berlin, Joe Wippl. The German intelligence agency handling Curveball “has not been able to verify his reporting,” Wippl warned. He added: “The source himself is problematical. Defer to headquarters, but to use information from another liaison service’s source whose information cannot be verified on such an important, key topic should take the most serious consideration.”

Powell knew nothing about these serious concerns. The C.I.A.’s dissenters were not in the room during the secretary’s U.N. speech preparation — and Curveball’s intelligence was the room’s star attraction. “George was on the team, and that itself is an issue,” Wippl would later reflect. “It was, ‘Hey, guys, we’re going to war — and we’ll find this stuff anyway once we’re there.’ It’s something that, in retrospect, kind of makes you sick.”

On the evening of Feb. 4 at U.N. headquarters, Powell went over his speech one final time. He asked Tenet if he felt comfortable with the facts marshaled in the speech. The C.I.A. director said that he did. “Good,” Powell said.
“Because I want you sitting right behind me when I give it tomorrow morning.” Tenet was reluctant — he was aware that his appearing with the secretary would give the appearance that the C.I.A. was putting its seal of approval on administration policy — but he was way past the point of protesting.

At 10:30 the following morning, Powell addressed the international body. For the next 76 minutes, he laid out the U.S. government’s case against Hussein. “My colleagues, every statement I make today is backed up by sources, solid sources,” Powell said in his calm, sonorous baritone. “These are not assertions. What we’re giving you are facts and conclusions based on solid intelligence.”

The story Powell told marked a departure from the Bush administration’s evocations of madness, evil and mushroom clouds. It was an investigator’s meticulous brief of institutionalized deception and murderous intent. Powell spoke of a key source, “an eyewitness, an Iraqi chemical engineer,” who happened to be watching the speech at home with his wife in Erlangen, Germany. He spoke of one of Curveball’s confirming sources, “an Iraqi major” — surprising a Defense Intelligence Agency staff member watching the speech who, months earlier, had interviewed the major and determined him to be a fabricator.

He spoke of decontamination trucks at chemical-weapons factories, to the consternation of the chemical-weapons analyst Larry Fox, who had repeatedly warned that the speech was making too much out of what might well be innocuous vehicles but had been repeatedly overruled by his superiors. And he spoke of aluminum tubes that “most experts think” were to be used for uranium enrichment — ignoring his department’s own experts, including the I.N.R.’s director, Carl Ford, who became heartsick watching Powell on TV and informed the secretary three months later that he was resigning.

In the audience in the Security Council chamber was a young U.N. weapons inspector named Dawson Cagle, who had recently returned from Baghdad. Sitting next to Cagle was one of Hans Blix’s senior munitions experts, who had also just returned from Iraq’s capital. The expert’s mouth opened when Powell displayed photographs of trucks moving into a suspected weapons of mass destruction bunker hours before an inspection team was due to visit, followed by a photo of the inspectors filing through a now-empty bunker. “I’m in that
photo,” the munitions expert whispered to Cagle. “I went into that bunker that those trucks pulled up to. There was a three-inch layer of pigeon dung covering everything. And a layer of dust on top of that. There’s no way someone came in and cleaned that place out. No way they could’ve faked that.”

But back at the White House, Bush watched Powell’s speech in the small dining room connected to the Oval Office, visibly pleased. On Capitol Hill, at a Democratic Senate caucus meeting after the U.N. speech, Tom Daschle, the majority leader, told his colleagues that he was now “really convinced” that Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. To the caucus, he said: “You may not trust Dick Cheney. But do you not trust Colin Powell?”