

by Ray McGovern, May 18, 2009

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***Four days before trying to sell the invasion of Iraq to the United Nations, Secretary of State Colin Powell was ready to scrap dubious allegations about Saddam Hussein's ties to al-Qaeda but was dissuaded by top CIA officials who cited a new "bombshell" that now appears to have been derived from torture, a top Powell aide says.***

Retired Col. Lawrence Wilkerson, who was then Powell's chief of staff, said the key moment occurred on Feb. 1, 2003, as the two men labored at the CIA over Powell's presentation to the U.N. Security Council set for Feb. 5.

"Powell and I had a one-on-one — no one else even in the room — about his angst over what was a rather dull recounting of several old stories about Al Qa'ida-Baghdad ties [in the draft speech]," Wilkerson said. "I agreed with him that what we had was bull\_\_\_t, and Powell decided to eliminate all mention of terrorist contacts between AQ and Baghdad.

"Within an hour, [CIA Director George] Tenet and [CIA Deputy Director John] McLaughlin dropped a bombshell on the table in the [CIA] director's Conference Room: a high-level AQ detainee had just revealed under interrogation substantive contacts between AQ and Baghdad, including Iraqis training AQ operatives in the use of chemical and biological weapons."

Though Tenet and McLaughlin wouldn't give Powell the identity of the al-Qaeda source, Wilkerson said he now understands that it was Ibn al-Sheikh al-Libi, an al-Qaeda operative who later claimed he gave the CIA false information in the face of actual and threatened torture.

Not realizing that the new intelligence was tainted, "Powell changed his mind and this information was included in his UNSC presentation, along with some more general information from the previous text about Baghdad's terrorist tendencies," Wilkerson said.

Wilkerson's account underscores how the Bush administration's reliance on harsh interrogations of al-Qaeda suspects influenced the rush to war with Iraq, while also pointing out how the need to justify the war gave impetus to the use of torture for extracting information.

### Sealing the Deal

Powell, whose credibility essentially sealed the deal for war as far as millions of Americans were concerned, also appears to have let himself be manipulated by senior CIA officials who kept him in the dark about crucial details, including the fact that the Defense Intelligence Agency doubted al-Libi's credibility.

"As you can see, nowhere were we told that the high-level AQ operative had a name, or that he had been interrogated [in Egypt] with no US personnel present or much earlier rather than just recently (the clear implication of Tenet's breathtaking delivery)," Wilkerson said.

"And not a single dissent was mentioned (later we learned of the DIA dissent) ... All of this was hidden from us – the specific identity, we were informed, due to the desire to protect sources and methods as well as a cooperative foreign intelligence service. ...

"As for me in particular, I learned the identity of al-Libi only in 2004 and of the DIA dissent about the same time, of al-Libi's recanting slightly later, and of the entire affair's probably being a Tenet-McLaughlin fabrication – to at least a certain extent – only after I began to put some things together and to receive reinforcement of the 'fabrication' theme from other examples."

Among those other examples, Wilkerson said, was the case of an Iraqi "defector" codenamed Curveball, who supplied false intelligence about mobile labs for making biological and chemical weapons, and various Iraqi walk-ins who spun bogus stories about an Iraqi nuclear weapons program.

Though some of those sources appear to have concocted their tales after being recruited by the

pro-invasion exiles of the Iraqi National Congress, al-Libi told his stories – he later claimed – to avoid or stop torture, a central point in the current debate about whether torture saved American lives.

For those of you distracted by the Fawning Corporate Media (FCM) spotlight on “what-did-Pelosi-know-about-torture-and-when-did-she-know-it,” please turn off the TV long enough to ponder the case of the recently departed al-Libi, who reportedly died in a Libyan prison, a purported suicide.

The al-Libi case might help you understand why, even though information from torture is notoriously unreliable, President George W. Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney and the sycophants running U.S. intelligence ordered it anyway.

In short, if it is untruthful information you are after, torture can work just fine! As the distinguished Senator from South Carolina, Lindsey Graham put it during a Senate hearing on May 13 — with a hat-tip to the Inquisition — “One of the reasons these techniques have been used for about 500 years is that they work.”

All you really need to know is what you want the victims to “confess” to and then torture them, or render them abroad to “friendly” intelligence services toward the same end.

### **Poster Child for Torture**

Al-Libi, born in 1963 in Libya, ran an al-Qaeda training camp in Afghanistan from 1995 to 2000. He was detained in Pakistan on Nov. 11, 2001, and then sent to a U.S. detention facility in Kandahar, Afghanistan. He was deemed a prize catch, since he would know of any Iraqi training of al-Qaeda.

The CIA successfully fought off the FBI for first rights to interrogate al-Libi. FBI's Dan Coleman, who “lost” al-Libi to the CIA (at whose orders, I wonder?), said, “Administration officials were always pushing us to come up with links” between Iraq and al-Qaeda.

Meanwhile, at the Guantanamo Bay prison in Cuba, Maj. Paul Burney, a psychiatrist sent there in summer 2002, told the Senate, "A large part of the time we were focused on trying to establish a link between al-Qaeda and Iraq and we were not successful.

"The more frustrated people got in not being able to establish that link ... there was more and more pressure to resort to measures that might produce more immediate results."

CIA interrogators elicited some "cooperation" from al-Libi through a combination of rough treatment and threats that he would be turned over to Egyptian intelligence with even greater experience in the torture business.

By June 2002, al-Libi had told the CIA that Iraq had "provided" unspecified chemical and biological weapons training for two al-Qaeda operatives, an allegation that soon found its way into other U.S. intelligence reports. Al-Libi's claim was well received even though the DIA was suspicious.

"He lacks specific details" about the supposed training, the DIA observed. "It is possible he does not know any further details; it is more likely this individual is intentionally misleading the debriefers. Ibn al-Shaykh has been undergoing debriefs for several weeks and may be describing scenarios to the debriefers that he knows will retain their interest."

Despite his cooperation, al-Libi was still shipped to Egypt where he underwent more abuse, according to a declassified CIA cable from 2004 when al-Libi recanted his earlier statements. The cable reported that al-Libi said Egyptian interrogators wanted information about al-Qaeda's connections with Iraq, a subject "about which [al-Libi] said he knew nothing and had difficulty even coming up with a story."

According to the CIA cable, al-Libi said his interrogators did not like his responses and "placed him in a small box" for about 17 hours. After he was let out of the box, al-Libi was given a last chance to "tell the truth."

When his answers still did not satisfy, al-Libi says he “was knocked over with an arm thrust across his chest and fell on his back” and then was “punched for 15 minutes.”

And, as Sen. Graham noted, that stuff really works! For it was then that al-Libi expanded on his tales about collaboration between al-Qaeda and Iraq, adding that three al-Qaeda operatives had gone to Iraq “to learn about nuclear weapons.” Afterwards, he said his treatment improved.

Al-Libi’s stories misinformed Colin Powell’s U.N. speech, which sought to establish a “sinister nexus” between Iraq and al-Qaeda to justify invading Iraq.

Al-Libi recanted his claims in January 2004. That prompted the CIA, a month later, to recall all intelligence reports based on his statements, a fact recorded in a footnote to the report issued by the 9/11 Commission.

Bear in mind that before the attack on Iraq on March 19, 2003, polls showed that some 70 percent Americans believed that Saddam Hussein had operational ties with al-Qaeda and thus was partly responsible for the attacks of 9/11.

### **Just What the Doctor Ordered**

George Bush relied on al-Libi’s false confession for his crucial speech in Cincinnati on Oct. 7, 2002, just a few days before Congress voted on the Iraq War resolution. Bush declared, “We’ve learned that Iraq has trained al-Qaeda members in bomb making and poisons and deadly gases.”

Colin Powell relied on it for his crucial speech to the U.N. on Feb. 5, 2003. He said: “I can trace the story of a senior terrorist operative telling how Iraq provided training in these [chemical and biological] weapons to al-Qaeda. Fortunately, this operative is now detained, and he has told his story.”

For a while, al-Libi was practically the poster boy for the success of the Cheney/Bush torture regime; that is, until he publicly recanted and explained that he only told his interrogators what he thought would stop the torture.

In his disingenuous memoir, *At the Center of the Storm*, Tenet sought to defend the CIA's use of the claims made by al-Libi in the run-up to the Iraq war, suggesting that al-Libi's later recantation may not have been genuine.

"He clearly lied," Tenet writes in his book. "We just don't know when. Did he lie when he first said that Al Qaeda members received training in Iraq or did he lie when he said they did not? In my mind, either case might still be true."

Really; that's what Tenet writes.

Tenet's stubborn faith in the CIA's "product" reflects the reality that he is not a disinterested observer. If there was a CIA plan to extract a false confession, it's likely he was a key participant.

After all, he devoted 2002-03 to the mission of manufacturing a "slam-dunk" case for invading Iraq in order to please his bosses. He had both the motive and the opportunity to commit this crime.

Well, if al-Libi is now dead — strangely our embassy in Tripoli was unable to find out for sure — this means the world will never hear his own account of the torture he experienced and the story he made up and then recanted.

And we will all be asked to believe he "committed suicide" even though it is apparently true that al-Libi was a devout Muslim and Islam prohibits suicide.

Hafed al-Ghwell, a Libyan-American and a prominent critic of the Gaddafi regime, explained to

*Newsweek*

, “This idea of committing suicide in your prison cell is an old story in Libya.”

He added that, throughout Gaddafi’s 40-year rule, there had been several instances in which political prisoners were reported to have committed suicide, but that “then the families get the bodies back and discover the prisoners had been shot in the back or tortured to death.”

Am I suggesting...?

### **Anatomy of a Crime**

Commenting on what he called the “Cheney interrogation techniques,” Col. Wilkerson, writing for *The Washington Note* on May 13, made the following observations:

“...as the administration authorized harsh interrogation in April and May of 2002 — well before the Justice Department had rendered any legal opinion — its principal priority for intelligence was not aimed at pre-empting another terrorist attack on the U.S. but on discovering a smoking gun linking Iraq to al-Qaeda.

“So furious was this effort on one particular detainee, even when the interrogation team had reported to Cheney’s office that their detainee ‘was compliant’ (meaning the team recommended no more torture), the VP’s office ordered them to continue the advanced methods. The detainee had not revealed any al-Qa’ida-Baghdad contacts yet.

“This ceased only after Ibn al-Shaykh al-Libi, under waterboarding in Egypt, ‘revealed’ such contacts. Of course later we learned that al-Libi revealed these contacts only to get the torture to stop.”

Stung by Wilkerson’s criticism of her father, Liz Cheney, who worked in the State Department during the last administration, lashed out at Wilkerson, charging he has made “a cottage

industry out of fantasies” about the former Vice President.

All that Ms. Cheney could manage in rebuttal, though, was to point out that al-Libi was not among the three al-Qaeda figures that the U.S. has admitted to waterboarding.

After his article in The Washington Note, I asked Col. Wilkerson for a retrospective look at how it could have been that the torture-derived information from al-Libi was not recognized for what it was and thus kept out of Secretary Powell’s speech at the UN.

Since al-Libi had been captured over a year before the speech and had been put at the tender mercies of the Egyptian intelligence service, should he and Powell not have suspected that al-Libi had been tortured?

Wilkerson responded by e-mail with the comments cited above regarding Tenet and McLaughlin interrupting Powell’s evaluation of the Iraqi WMD intelligence with their new – vaguely sourced – “bombshell.”

I asked Col. Wilkerson: “Were there no others from the State Department with you at CIA headquarters on Feb. 1, 2003. Was INR [State’s very professional, incorruptible intelligence unit] not represented? He answered:

“When I gathered ‘my team’ – some were selected for me, such as Will Toby from Bob Joseph’s NSC staff and John Hannah from the VP’s office – in my office at State to give them an initial briefing and marching orders, I asked Carl [Ford, head of INR] to attend. I wanted Carl – or even more so, one of his deputies whom I knew well and trusted completely, Tom Fingar – to be on ‘my team’.

“Carl stayed after the meeting and I asked him straightforwardly to come with me or to send someone from INR. Carl said that he did not need to come nor to send anyone because he had the Secretary’s ear (he was right on that) and could weigh in at any time he wanted to.

“Moreover, he told me, the Secretary knew very well where INR stood, as did I myself (he was right on that too).

“As I look back, I believe one of my gravest errors was in not insisting that INR send someone with me.

“Fascinating and completely puzzling at first was the total absence of a Department of Defense representative on my team; however, after 3-4 days and nights I figured out ... DoD was covering its own butt, to an extent, by having no direct fingerprints on the affair — and being directly wired into Cheney’s office, Rumsfeld’s folks knew they were protected by Toby and Hannah.

“When we all arrived at CIA, we were given the NIC [National Intelligence Council] spaces and staff. [But] I could not even get on a computer!! Protests to Tenet and McLaughlin got me perfunctory CIA-blah blah about security clearances, etc. — and me with 7 days and nights to prepare a monumentally important presentation! ...

“[It took] 24 hours before George or John acknowledged I could be on a computer.... From there on, it was a madhouse.

“But at the end of the day, had I had an INR rep, had I had better support, had I been more concerned with WHAT I was assembling rather than HOW on earth I would assemble it and present it on time, I'm not sure at all it would have made any difference in the march to war.”

### **Not the Only Crime**

So there you have it folks, the anatomy of a crime — one of several such, I might add.

Mention of Carl Ford and Tenet and McLaughlin remind me of another episode that has gone down in the annals of intelligence as almost equally contemptible. This one had to do with CIA’s

furious attempt to prove there were mobile biological weapons labs of the kind Curveball had described.

Remember, Tenet and McLaughlin had been warned about Curveball long before they let then-Secretary of State Powell shame himself, and the rest of us, by peddling Curveball's wares at the U.N. Security Council on Feb. 5, 2003.

But the amateur attempts at deception did not stop there. After the war began, CIA intrepid analysts, still "leaning forward," misrepresented a tractor-trailer found in Iraq outfitted with industrial equipment as one of the mobile bio-labs.

On May 28, 2003, CIA analysts cooked up a fraudulent six-page report claiming that the trailer discovered earlier in May was proof they had been right about Iraq's "bio-weapons labs."

They then performed what could be called a "night-time requisition," getting the only Defense Intelligence Agency analyst sympathetic to their position to provide DIA "coordination," (which was subsequently withdrawn by DIA).

On May 29, President George W. Bush, visiting Poland, proudly announced on Polish TV, "We have found the weapons of mass destruction." [For a contemporaneous debunking of the CIA-DIA report, see Consortiumnews.com's "[America's Matrix](#) ."]

When the State Department's Intelligence and Research (INR) analysts realized that this was not some kind of Polish joke, they "went ballistic," according to Carl Ford, who immediately warned Powell there was a problem.

Tenet must have learned of this quickly, for he called Ford on the carpet, literally, the following day. No shrinking violet, Ford held his ground. He told Tenet and McLaughlin, "That report is one of the worst intelligence assessments I've ever read."

This vignette — and several like it — are found in *Hubris: The Inside Story of Spin, Scandal, and the Selling of the Iraq War* by Michael Isikoff and David Corn, who say Ford is still angry over the fraudulent paper.

Ford told the authors: “It was clear that they [Tenet and McLaughlin] had been personally involved in the preparation of the report... It wasn’t just that it was wrong. They lied.”

Too bad Carl Ford made the incorrect assumption that he could rely on his credibility and entrée with Secretary Powell to thwart the likes of Tenet and McLaughlin, as they peddled their meretricious wares at CIA headquarters — with Col. Wilkerson left to twist in the wind, so to speak.

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