

The Man Who Knew

CBS News

Wednesday 15 October 2003

In the run-up to the war in Iraq, one moment seemed to be a turning point: the day Secretary of State Colin Powell went to the United Nations to make the case for the invasion.

Millions of people watched as he laid out the evidence and reached a damning conclusion -- that Saddam Hussein was in possession of weapons of mass destruction.

Correspondent Scott Pelley has an interview with Greg Thielmann, a former expert on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. Thielmann, a foreign-service officer for 25 years, now says that key evidence in the speech was misrepresented and the public was deceived.

"I had a couple of initial reactions. Then I had a more mature reaction," says Thielmann, commenting on Powell's presentation to the United Nations.

"I think my conclusion now is that it's probably one of the low points in his long, distinguished service to the nation."

Thielmann's last job at the State Department was director of the Office of Strategic Proliferation and Military Affairs, which was responsible for analyzing the Iraqi weapons threat for Secretary Powell. He and his staff had the highest security clearances, and everything -- whether it came into the CIA or the Defense Department -- came through his office.

Thielmann was admired at the State Department. One high-ranking official called him honorable, knowledgeable, and very experienced. Thielmann, too, had planned to retire just four months before Powell's big moment at the U.N.

On Feb. 5, 2003, Secretary Powell presented evidence against Saddam to the U.N., and the speech represented a change in Powell's thinking. Before 9/11, he said Saddam had "not developed any significant capability in weapons of mass destruction." But two years later, he warned that Saddam had stockpiled those very weapons.

"The gravity of this moment is matched by the gravity of the threat that Iraq's weapons of mass destruction pose to the world," said Powell.

At the time of Powell's speech, Thielmann says that Iraq didn't pose an imminent threat to anyone: "I think it didn't even constitute an imminent threat to its neighbors at the time we went to war."

But Thielmann also says that he believes the decision to go to war was made first, and then the intelligence was interpreted to fit that conclusion. For example, he points to the evidence behind Powell's charge that Iraq was importing aluminum tubes to use in a program to build nuclear weapons.

Powell said: "Saddam Hussein is determined to get his hands on a nuclear bomb. He is so determined that he has made repeated covert attempts to acquire high-specification aluminum tubes from 11 different countries even after inspections resumed."

"This is one of the most disturbing parts of Secretary Powell's speech for us," says Thielmann.

Intelligence agents intercepted the tubes in 2001, and the CIA said they were parts for a centrifuge to enrich uranium - fuel for an atom bomb. But Thielmann wasn't so sure. Experts at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory, the scientists who enriched uranium for American bombs, advised that the tubes were all wrong for a bomb program. At about the same time, Thielmann's office was working on another explanation. It turned out the tubes' dimensions perfectly matched an Iraqi conventional rocket.

"The aluminum was exactly, I think, what the Iraqis wanted for artillery," recalls Thielmann, who says he sent that word up to the Secretary of State months before.

Houston Wood was a consultant who worked on the Oak Ridge analysis of the tubes. He watched Powell's speech, too.

"I guess I was angry, that's the best way to describe my emotions. I was angry at that," says Wood, who is among the world's authorities on uranium enrichment by centrifuge. He found the tubes couldn't be what the CIA thought they were. They were too heavy, three times too thick and certain to leak.

Months later, Thielmann reported to Secretary Powell's office that they were confident the tubes were not for a nuclear program. Then, about a year later, when the administration was building a case for war, the tubes were resurrected on the front page of The New York Times.

"I thought when I read that there must be some other tubes that people were talking about. I just was flabbergasted that people were still pushing that those might be centrifuges," says Wood, who reached his conclusion back in 2001. "It didn't make any sense to me."

The New York Times reported that senior administration officials insisted the tubes were for an atom-bomb program.

"Science was not pushing this forward. Scientists had made their determination their evaluation and now we didn't know what was happening," says Wood.

In his U.N. speech, Secretary Powell acknowledged there was disagreement about the tubes, but he said most experts agreed with the nuclear theory.

"There is controversy about what these tubes are for. Most U.S. experts think they are intended to serve as rotors in centrifuges used to enrich uranium," said Powell.

"Most experts are located at Oak Ridge and that was not the position there," says Wood, who claims he doesn't know anyone in academia or foreign government who would disagree with his appraisal. "I don't know a single one anywhere."

Thielmann says the nuclear case was filled with half-truths. So why would the Secretary take the information that Thielmann's intelligence bureau had developed and turn it on its head?

"I can only assume that he was doing it to loyally support the President of the United States and build the strongest possible case for arguing that there was no alternative to the use of military force," says Thielmann.

That was a case the president himself was making only eight days before Secretary Powell's speech. It was a State of the Union address that turned out to be too strong: "The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa. Our intelligence sources tell us that he has attempted to purchase high-strength aluminum tubes suitable for nuclear-weapons production."

After the war, the White House said the African uranium claim was false and shouldn't have been in the address. But at the time, it was part of a campaign that painted the intelligence as irrefutable.

"There is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction. There is no doubt he is amassing them to use against our friends, against our allies, and against us," said Cheney.

But if there was no doubt in public, Thielmann says there was plenty of doubt in the intelligence community. He says the administration took murky information out of the gray area and made it black and white.

Powell said: "My colleagues, every statement I make today is backed up by sources, solid sources. These are not assertions. What we are giving you are facts and conclusions based on solid intelligence."

Solid intelligence, Powell said, that proved Saddam had amassed chemical and biological weapons: "Our conservative estimate is that Iraq today has a stockpile of between 100 and 500 tons of chemical-weapons agent. That's enough to fill 16,000 battlefield rockets."

He also said part of the stockpile was clearly in these bunkers: "The four that are in red squares represent active chemical munitions bunkers. How do I know that, how can I say that? Let me give you a closer look."

Up close, Powell said you could see a truck for cleaning up chemical spills, a signature for a chemical bunker: "It's a decontamination vehicle in case something goes wrong."

But Thielmann disagreed with Powell's statement: "My understanding is that these particular vehicles were simply fire trucks. You cannot really describe as being a unique signature."

Satellite photos were also notoriously misleading, according to Steve Allinson, a U.N. inspector in Iraq in the months leading up to war.

Was there ever a time when American satellite intelligence provided Allinson with something that was truly useful?

"No. No, not to me. Not on inspections that I participated in," says Allinson, whose team was sent to find decontamination vehicles that turned out to be fire trucks.

Another time, a satellite spotted what they thought were trucks used for biological weapons.

"We were told we were going to the site to look for refrigerated trucks specifically linked to biological agents," says Allinson. "We found 7 or 8 of them I think in total. And they had cobwebs in them. Some samples were taken and nothing was found."

Allinson watched Powell's speech in Iraq with a dozen U.N. inspectors. There was great anticipation in the room. Like waiting for the Super Bowl, they always suspected the U.S. was holding back its most damning evidence for this moment.

What was the reaction among the inspectors as they watched the speech?

"Various people would laugh at various times because the information he was presenting was just, you know, didn't mean anything, had no meaning," says Allinson.

And what did he and the other inspectors say when Secretary Powell finished the speech?

"They have nothing," says Allinson.

If Allinson doubted the satellite evidence, Thielmann watched with worry as Secretary Powell told the Security Council that human intelligence provided conclusive proof.

Thielmann says that many of the human sources were defectors who came forward with an ax to grind. But how reliable was the defector information they received?

"I guess I would say, frequently we got bad information," says Thielmann.

Some of it came from defectors supplied by the Iraqi National Congress, the leading exile group headed by Ahmed Chalabi.

"You had the Iraqi National Congress with a clear motive for presenting the worst possible picture of what was happening in Iraq to the American government," says Thielmann.

That may have been the case with Adnan Sayeed Haideiri, whose information was provided by the Iraqi National Congress to the U.S. Government and The New York Times. He appeared on CBS News.

Haideiri said he was a civil engineer and claimed to have visited many secret weapon-production sites. The government thought he was so valuable they put him in a witness protection program. The White House listed him first in its Web page on Iraqi weapons.

"He was basically an epoxy painter," says David Albright, a physicist who has investigated defectors for his work with the U.N.

Albright studied a transcript of Haideiri's claims: "If you read a transcript of an interview that he went through, he has no knowledge of chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons."

What did they find from Haideri's information? Nothing, says Albright.

But there was a good deal more in Secretary Powell's speech that bothered the analysts. Powell claimed Saddam still had a few dozen Scud missiles.

"I wondered what he was talking about," says Thielmann. "We did not have evidence that the Iraqis had those missiles, pure and simple."

Powell warned that empty chemical warheads found recently by the U.N. could be the tip of the iceberg. "They were shells left over from the Gulf War. Or prior to the Gulf War, from their past programs," says Allinson.

Powell, however, made several points that turned out to be right. Among them, he was right when he said Iraqi labs were removing computer hard drives; he was right that Iraq had drawings for a new long-range missile; and he was right about Saddam's murder of thousands of Iraqi citizens.

But, an interim report by coalition inspectors says that so far, there is no evidence of a uranium enrichment program, no chemical weapons, no biological weapons, and no Scud missiles.

The State Department told 60 Minutes II that Secretary Powell would not be available for an interview. But this month, he said the jury on Iraq is still out: "So I think one has to look at the whole report. Have we found a factory or a plant or a warehouse full of chemical rounds? No, not yet but there is much more work to be done."

Powell added that Iraq was a danger to the world, but the people could judge how clear and present a danger it was.

As for Greg Thielmann, he told 60 Minutes II that he's a reluctant witness. His decision to speak developed over time, and he says the president's address worried him because he knew the African uranium story was false. He said he watched Secretary Powell's speech with disappointment because, up until then, he had seen Powell bringing what he called "reason" to the administration's inner circle.

Today, Thielmann believes the decision to go to war was made -- and the intelligence was interpreted to fit that conclusion.

"There's plenty of blame to go around. The main problem was that the senior administration officials have what I call faith-based intelligence. They knew what they wanted the intelligence to show," says Thielmann.

"They were really blind and deaf to any kind of countervailing information the intelligence community would produce. I would assign some blame to the intelligence community, and most of the blame to the senior administration officials."

The administration wants to spend several hundred million dollars more to continue the search for evidence.

After turning down repeated requests for an interview by 60 Minutes II, Colin Powell spoke to the BBC Wednesday afternoon about Thielmann's claim that he misinformed the nation during his February U.N. speech.

"That's nonsense. I don't think I used the word 'imminent' in my presentation on the 5th of February. I presented, on the 5th of February not something I pulled out of the air. I presented the considered judgment of the intelligence community of the United States of America -- the coordinated judgment of the intelligence community of the United States of America," said Powell, according to a transcript of the interview released by the State Department.

"The investigation continues. There is an individual, I guess, who is going on a television show to say I misled the American people. I don't mislead the American people and I never would. I presented the best information that our intelligence community had to offer."

When the BBC interviewer pointed out that Thielmann was considered the leading expert for Iraqi weapons of mass destruction in his department, Powell replied: "I have many experts in my department, and there are many differences of opinion, among any group of experts. And it's quite easy for a television program to get this individual and then they complain. But to try to turn it around and say that 'Secretary Powell made this all up and presented it, knowing it was false,' is simply inaccurate."

Powell again refuted the charges in an Oct. 16 interview with National Public Radio.

"It wasn't hyped. It wasn't overblown," said Powell, in a transcript released by the State Department. "I would not do that to the American people, nor would I do that before the Security Council, as a representative of the American people and of the President of the United States."

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