



PAUL PILLAR ON IRAQ

by Garrett Jones

Garrett Jones is a 1993 graduate of the U.S. Army War College. He served as a case officer with the CIA in Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. He retired in 1997 and now lives in the northwestern United States. CIA Statement: "This material has been reviewed by the CIA. That review neither constitutes CIA authentication of information nor implies CIA endorsement of the author's views."

Paul Pillar's article in the March/April 2006 *Foreign Affairs*, "Intelligence, Policy, and the War in Iraq" <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20060301faessay85202/paul-r-pillar/intelligence-policy-and-the-war-in-iraq.html> makes sad reading. Pillar, who left the intelligence community last year, would have us believe that from his low-level position therein, he watched while the Bush administration perverted the intelligence process and charged off into a war that was known to everyone to be both unneeded and unjustified. Had they only asked him, he could have set them straight. Shame on them and let it be a warning to anyone else that slights the analysts in the intelligence community.

From 2000 until 2005, Pillar was the National Intelligence Officer (NIO) for the Near East and South Asia. The NIO is the individual in the intelligence community responsible for coordinating all finished intelligence products on his or her particular subject matter--in this case, the Near East, which includes Iraq. Finished intelligence products are all-source reports or assessments of a subject or situation. They are the best estimate of what the U.S. intelligence community believes to be the truth at a given point in time. The bottom line is that if Pillar did not sign off on a finished intelligence report, it was not published until the report was changed or an official note in the text of the document was made that Pillar disagreed with its judgments in some manner. Officially, Pillar was the go-to guy for Iraq. Seemingly, one of his main complaints is that no one went to him.

This is passing strange, because normally, the Directorate of Intelligence (DI) creates the draft of a national intelligence estimate about an individual country, and then the NIO with area responsibility (Pillar in this case) ensures that its final wording is agreed on by all the other involved parts of the intelligence community. I understand this was not the case with the Iraq National Intelligence Estimate (NIE). Despite another office's being the lead on this report, Pillar's senior and central position on all things Iraqi gave him wide latitude to make sure any misgivings he may have had about the content of the NIE were effectively included in the final draft of the document. It appears that either Pillar was taken out of the process, or he was in the middle of a process he knew was flawed and failed to say anything. Either case would be an interesting insight into a historic debacle, but neither is the story Pillar is telling.

Pillar also fails to mention that as the NIO, he did not need to wait for anyone to ask him for any report. Normally, NIEs are issued at the request of high-level policymakers, but an NIO can order up an assessment or report any time he thinks it is necessary. It is indeed the point of his job. If something is developing in his area of responsibility and the policymakers are not focused on it, the NIO is supposed to order up an assessment to give them a warning of a developing problem. NIOs also regularly write less formal memos to policymakers if they feel there is a problem with U.S. policy or practice, without waiting to be asked.

Pillar also asserts that it was a broadly held view that Saddam was being kept "in his box" by the then policy on Iraq. I was not in the intelligence community at the time, but as I recall, Saddam was handing out \$25,000 bonuses to suicide bombers in the Gaza Strip; all internal Iraqi dissent had been crushed, so that no reform of any kind was on the horizon; the oil-for-food program was a complete failure and a vehicle for widespread corruption; Saddam had already tried at least once to have his intelligence agents assassinate former president George H. W. Bush in a neighboring country; and Iraq's air defense were improving on a daily basis, making the no-fly policy a daily lottery on whether Saddam would have U.S. or British pilots as hostages. While going to war with Iraq might not have been Pillar's personal choice as a new policy, I can hardly call what we were doing before the invasion a successful policy with a rosy outlook. We were going to have to do something else, and soon.

Pillar further laments the political pressure exerted on the hapless intelligence analysts, despite the fact that the subsequent fact-finding commissions who looked for the pressure on analysts could not, as Pillar acknowledges, find it. Perhaps it was, as he says, "unacknowledged" by the analysts. (They did not know it was happening but it really was.) I will grant you that

brand-new, GS-9 analysts, on their first month at work, are going to be awed by the vice president of the United States' coming out to the CIA and asking them if they are certain about their judgments. (It was in fact unprecedented for the vice president to come out to the HQS building and meet the analysts as a group, in the past, a vice president would usually call analysts down to his private White House office one at a time to put each through the wringer. That said, senior analysts such as those putting together the Iraqi NIE who back down because a consumer does not like their judgments deserve to be cashiered from the intelligence community and publicly disgraced. Having the consumer dislike the information you are bringing him is not only part of the job, it happens all the time, with every administration, at every level, whether you are an analyst or a case officer. What you have to say as an intelligence officer is usually at variance with something the consumer wants to believe.

Pillar goes to some length to point out that analysts and intelligence officers do not make policy. He is right. Sometimes policymakers do stupid things even after intelligence officers give them better alternatives. He is also correct that policymakers will come back time after time and ask intelligence officers the same question in different ways to see if the answer changes. This is an annoying quirk of human nature, but usually it only happens with important questions, like going to war. As a citizen, Pillar has every right to these views. But it was as a serving intelligence officer that he spoke at a dinner reported on by Robert Novak in September 2004, in the middle of a presidential election, to express his dissenting views to a partisan audience.

The NIE on Iraq was not a product that was "flawed." It was dead wrong, 180 degrees away from the truth. Secretary of State Powell relied on its veracity, and he had Mr. Tenet sit behind him at the UN when he appeared there to highlight that point. I certainly believed the public version of the Iraqi NIE when I first read it in the media. It was my own fault; I simply did not believe the analyst community could get it that wrong. Shame on me for my lack of imagination. I have read more than a few NIEs in my time at the CIA and they are usually a model of hedging words. For its genre, the Iraqi NIE was forthright and explicit. It was an appalling mistake, made on Pillar's watch; revisionist history does no one any credit.

In the final part of his article, Pillar discusses a new relationship he believes should be established between Congress and the intelligence community. I do not claim to fully understand his recommendation, but as best I can make out, "if foolish presidents are going to ignore the advice of wise intelligence analysts, then there should be a formal procedure to correct this." It also seems to include an independent intelligence panel not immediately answerable to Congress or the executive branch, which could hold these branches of government to account for "misusing" intelligence. I think the chances of creating an intelligence czar or panel with such powers in the current climate are effectively nil.

Other than observing that there is in fact a political process going on in Washington D.C. and that it occasionally involves foreign policy matters, I am not sure what other useful points Pillar makes. If he is trying to make a case that he was not involved or responsible for the intelligence reporting leading up to Iraq war, I am afraid the facts as we currently know them are against him. Perhaps when other players in the process come forward with their stories, we will obtain a clearer view of Pillar's role in the events leading up to the Iraq war. Unfortunately, this article only further muddies the water.

FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684.

For information, contact Alan Luxenberg at 215-732-3774, ext. 105 or email fpri@fpri.org or visit us at www.fpri.org