

# WHO FIRST SPREAD THE IRAQI ANTHRAX CLAIM?

Glenn's asking some important questions about the anthrax story—mostly about who started the rumor in October 2001 that the anthrax might be from Iraq?

During the last week of October, 2001, ABC News, led by Brian Ross, continuously trumpeted the claim as their top news story that government tests conducted on the anthrax – tests conducted at Ft. Detrick – revealed that the anthrax sent to Daschele contained the chemical additive known as bentonite.

As Glenn points out, those early ABC stories seem to point back to a Ft. Detrick source—which is where Bruce Ivins worked. In other words, Glenn suggests, the report that Iraq was responsible was probably sourced back to government researchers in the same lab where—news reports allege—the chief suspect for the anthrax terrorism worked. This raises the specter of researchers carrying out the attack to lay the ground-work for the Iraq War.

But the ABC News story Glenn cites was not, apparently, the first allegation that the anthrax came from Iraq. RawStory reports that the story first appeared in the Guardian, followed quickly by a story in the WSJ editorial page, then in a Richard Butler comment on CNN.

RAW STORY has found that, although there had been active online speculation about an Iraqi source for the anthrax by the first week of October, the first suggestion that official investigations were focusing on that nation appears to have come in an article published in the *Guardian* on October 14.

[snip]

The next day, the *Wall Street Journal* picked up the story, but without the *Guardian's* skepticism, suggesting that the most likely suspect was al Qaeda using supplies obtained from Iraq.

[snip]

On the same day, CNN quoted former UN weapons inspector Richard Butler as saying, "What we've got to be certain about above all is whether it came from a country supporting these terrorists as a matter of policy, such as Iraq, which we know has made this stuff. And there's a credible report, not fully verified, that they may indeed have given anthrax to exactly the group that did the World Trade Center. ... It's possible that many months ago anthrax, a small quantity of it, was handed over in Prague to Mohamed Atta ... and the person who handed it over in Prague was an Iraqi."

I am utterly struck by both the content and one of the two authors of the Guardian report. David Rose has done some good and some really crappy reporting over the years, but he is best (worst) known for an article he wrote for Vanity Fair that relied on one of INC's defectors, Major Harith, who was one of the two or three people who "corroborated" Curveball's stories about Iraq having mobile bioweapons labs; the NIE actually laundered its reference to Harith through Rose's article (Harith was anonymous in the article), thereby getting around the fabricator notice placed on Harith several months before the NIE was written. Rose has long had good sources among the Neocons and was definitely getting stories from other INC members in addition to Harith. With that in mind, check out the degree to which his Guardian article reads like a smattering of INC/Neocon lies spewed to foment war with Iraq. First, there's the Iraq with anthrax claim:

American investigators probing anthrax

outbreaks in Florida and New York believe they have all the hallmarks of a terrorist attack – and have named Iraq as prime suspect as the source of the deadly spores. Their inquiries are adding to what US hawks say is a growing mass of evidence that Saddam Hussein was involved, possibly indirectly, with the 11 September hijackers.

[snip]

Leading US intelligence sources, involved with both the CIA and the Defence Department, told The Observer that the 'giveaway' which suggests a state sponsor for the anthrax cases is that the victims in Florida were afflicted with the airborne form of the disease.

[snip]

According to sources in the Bush administration, investigators are talking to Egyptian authorities who say members of the al-Qaida network, detained and interrogated in Cairo, had obtained phials of anthrax in the Czech Republic.

From the anthrax claim that is the core of the article, it then goes onto the alleged Atta-in-Prague meeting (note–David Rose realized that story was bunk and pushed back against the NYT's continued adherence to it in December 2002).

Last autumn Mohamed Atta is said by US intelligence officials to have met in Prague an agent from Iraqi intelligence called Ahmed Samir al-Ahani, a former consul later expelled by the Czechs for activities not compatible with his diplomatic mission.

The Czechs are also examining the possibility that Atta met a former director of Saddam's external secret

services, Farouk Hijazi, at a second meeting in the spring. Hijazi is known to have met Bin Laden.

Then, finally, the article reports on James Woolsey's trip to London to get the INC to drum up evidence against Iraq.

Contact has already been made with an Iraqi opposition group based in London with a view to installing its members as a future government in Baghdad.

[snip]

It was confirmed yesterday that Jim Woolsey, CIA director from 1993 to 1996, recently visited London on behalf of the hawkish Defence Department to 'firm up' other evidence of Iraqi involvement in 11 September.

In other words, though the article drips with skepticism about whether these stories are an attempt to drum up a way against Iraq, it is filled with—and clearly reliant upon as sources—INC and Neocon propaganda. It even names the hawks (and includes a quote from one):

The hawks winning the ear of President Bush is assembled around Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, his deputy Paul Wolfowitz, and a think tank, the Defence Policy Advisory Board, dubbed the 'Wolfowitz cabal'.

So, Rummy, Wolfowitz, Richard Perle (then head of the Defense Policy Board), and James Woolsey, who in turn brokered a lot of stories with the INC, including that of Major Harith. There must be further sources for this story, since Wolfowitz is too senior to be called a Defense intelligence source, and Woolsey would no longer be considered a CIA source. Nevertheless, this article clearly had the hallmarks of Neocon-INC propaganda that Rose later got stung by.

Which is why I find the second outlet for this story to be so interesting: The WSJ editorial page. Neither the location nor the utter lack of skepticism is any surprise. But I am struck by the fact that when—in July 2003, OVP wanted to defend their case for war, they used Paul Wolfowitz to leak classified documents to the WSJ editorial page.

From there, the story goes to Richard Butler, who was alleged to have collaborated improperly with US intelligence as a weapons inspector in the 1990s. He was, at this point in 2001, one of the hawks about Saddam's WMD, though to some degree that's understandable since he had to deal with Saddam directly.

And only then, about ten days later, to Brian Ross, with the "scoop" about the bentonite in the anthrax (as Glenn points out, the Weekly Standard then magnifies ABC's own reporting on the bentonite). In the interim period, the anthrax attack got much worse on account of the second batch of letters—those with more lethal anthrax—being sent. The highly lethal anthrax sent to Daschle was opened on October 15, the Senate was closed on October 16, and by October 22, 2,200 workers (many of them postal workers) were tested. So the first reports on Iraq and anthrax take place after both batches of letters have been sent, but only the first, less lethal letters have been found; the second reports on Iraq and anthrax take place after things got really bad at the Senate. And just for those keeping track at home, Neocon favorite Judy Miller opened her fake anthrax letter on October 12. Per Jane Mayer, there was a nerve attack scare in the White House situation room on October 18 and on October 22 the Secret Service reported anthrax traces on a letter opening device at the White House. As she writes,

By then [October 22], Cheney had convinced the President to support a \$1.6 billion bioterrorism-preparedness program. Cheney argued that every citizen in the country should be

vaccinated against smallpox. (4)

Ross' "scoop" seems to be tracked to four different, more low-level people.

Ross is another interesting recipient of this leak. His greatest hits include receiving the allegation that the FBI was tapping reporters, eventually breaking the Mark Foley story after sitting on it for a very long time, and sitting on the most scandalous names in the DC Madam's databases. In other words, someone who is very wired in—but also someone who avoids rocking the boat if he can help it (as he seems to be doing here). In 2001, Ross was doing a ton of stories more generally about 9/11—so he presumably had sources within FBI from those earlier stories.

Now, to be sure, these stories may well be unrelated—the first allegations, clearly spread by Neocons, suggesting both an Iraq-Al Qaeda link and pinning the anthrax on Iraq, followed by second allegations ultimately sourced to Ft. Detrick. In other words, the Neocons could have circulated propaganda—because that's what they do—after which Ivins or whomever used that earlier Neocon propaganda to shift attention away from Ft. Detrick. There's nothing, yet, that indicates the Neocons were tied to folks at Ft. Detrick.

But it sure does raise some questions, doesn't it?