

# Tenet Resignation Exposes Accelerating Intrigue Within Bush Administration

By Jim Lobe | June 9, 2004

The abrupt resignation of Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director George Tenet adds new grist to Washington's rumor mills, already churning at warp speed due to the ongoing prisoner-abuse scandal in Iraq and reports that the Bush administration's favorite in Baghdad turned over critical information to Iran.

Whether Tenet, who also served for seven years as the director of central intelligence (DCI)—a post that theoretically oversees all of Washington's 16 intelligence agencies—was pushed or decided to resign of his own accord is the question of the day. And, if he was pushed, why now, just five months before the presidential election?

In a speech to CIA employees at the agency's headquarters outside Washington on Thursday June 3, Tenet insisted that his decision was based exclusively on the "well-being of my wonderful family—nothing more, nothing less."

Bush himself echoed that, albeit in rather curious circumstances. Just a few minutes after a routine photo opportunity on the White House lawn with visiting Australian Prime Minister John Howard, the president reappeared before reporters to say Tenet had informed him of his decision to leave "for personal reasons" Wednesday evening.

"I told him I'm sorry he's leaving," Bush, who appears to have had an unusually warm relationship with Tenet and had long resisted right-wing pressure to fire him, said haltingly. "He's been a strong leader in the war on terror, and I will miss him." As has become customary, Bush took no questions and simply walked away.

But, as Tenet himself anticipated in his farewell, some observers suggested his decision may not have been entirely voluntary and could, in fact, mark the first of a series of high-level administration departures over the coming weeks as Bush's re-election campaign struggles to persuade voters to forget about setbacks in Iraq. "I think he's being pushed out," said former

CIA Director Stansfield Turner in an interview on CNN. "The president feels he has to have someone to blame."

"They want to use him as a scapegoat for everything that's gone wrong," one congressional aide said. "But I don't think that's going to work. While the CIA obviously fell down in major ways, everyone knows by now that the Pentagon has been at the heart of this whole mess."

Even as Tenet was bidding good-bye, reports that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has begun interviewing—in some cases with lie detectors—senior Pentagon civilians close to former Iraqi exile Ahmad Chalabi to determine who told him that U.S. intelligence had broken the codes Tehran uses to communicate with its spies dominated newspaper headlines. Those reports came in the wake of a *New York Times* article on June 4 that said Chalabi had informed Iran's top operative in Baghdad that the codes had been broken.

What with the administration deeply concerned about Iran's nuclear program, as well as its ability to disrupt Washington's efforts to stabilize neighboring Iraq, informing Iranian intelligence of such a development would represent a major security breach. On May 20 Chalabi's own residence and headquarters were raided by Iraqi police and U.S. agents and a \$340,000 monthly stipend that his group, the Iraqi National Congress (INC), had been receiving from the Pentagon for intelligence-gathering was cut off.

Chalabi, who has heatedly denied the allegations, has blamed the report on the CIA which, after backing the INC with millions of dollars in covert assis-



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tance in the early 1990s, broke with him after an aborted coup d'etat launched by a rival exile group headed by Ayad Allawi, who last weekend was selected as Iraq's new prime minister.

Allawi's emergence is seen as a decisive victory of the CIA and State Department over their neo-conservative rivals at the Pentagon and Vice President Dick Cheney's office, who have championed Chalabi since 1998. In recent days, Chalabi has lashed out against Tenet personally, accusing him of concocting the charges against him. Asked about Tenet's sudden resignation, Chalabi repeated those accusations, telling reporters that the CIA director's role in developing U.S.-Iraq policy has "not been helpful, to say the least." Tenet, he added, had provided "erroneous information about weapons of mass destruction (WMD) to President Bush, which caused the government much embarrassment at the United Nations and in his own country."

The latter charge appeared particularly ironic in view of the growing consensus, both in the administration and in Congress, that "defectors" provided by Chalabi's INC were the most important source of faulty—and, in some cases, apparently fabricated—reports of Baghdad's pre-war WMD programs. While the CIA and other intelligence agencies were skeptical of many of these reports, they were fed directly into the White House via Chalabi's backers in the Pentagon and Cheney's office, according to numerous published reports.

Nonetheless, in at least one case, Chalabi's charge about Tenet's own role in faulty WMD evidence appears to have been correct. According to journalist Bob Woodward's new book, *Plan of Attack*, a critical moment in the run-up to the war occurred when Bush himself expressed doubt that the public would be persuaded by the CIA's evidence of the threat posed by Iraq's WMD. "From the end of one of the couches in the Oval office, Tenet rose up, threw his arms in the air. 'It's a slam-dunk case!' the DCI said," Woodward reported, adding that Tenet repeated the phrase a second time when Bush asked whether he was confident about the evidence.

That account, on which Tenet has not commented, has proved very damaging to his position among war

critics, particularly moderate Republican and Democratic lawmakers, who until then had seen him as a restraining influence on Bush during the run-up to the war. Indeed, Tenet's loss of support from the war skeptics, as well as ongoing scandals around the performance of the CIA and even its use of interrogation techniques that amounted to torture and resulted in at least one death during the "war on terrorism," may have played a decisive role in his decision to resign now.

Lawmakers on both sides of the aisle are very angry at recent CIA delays in clearing a pending report on the intelligence community's performance before the war, which is itself expected to be strongly critical of Tenet. The commission established to investigate the causes of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington is expected to be similarly critical.

In addition, Tenet, who has talked to friends about wanting to leave the agency for at least two years, had become a lightning rod for anger by Republican right-wingers in Congress and neo-conservatives, who have long agitated for his removal in part because of his status as the highest-ranking holdover from the administration of former President Bill Clinton. "By leaving now, Tenet will be depriving them of a highly visible target," said the Capitol Hill aide. "I'm sure people at the CIA appreciate that, because they don't like being in the middle of a highly-charged political debate."

Another hint that it was Tenet himself who decided to leave now is suggested by the fact that his resignation will not take effect until July 11, the seventh anniversary of his swearing in. The timing bolsters the notion that he is leaving on his own terms, while Bush's failure to announce a successor, in the eyes of some analysts, indicates the White House was caught unawares by Tenet's departure.

For now his successor will be John McLaughlin, the current deputy director of the CIA and a career intelligence officer who is generally well respected in Congress. Whether Bush will retain McLaughlin through the November elections or make a political appointment will be a critical decision. It was widely rumored six months ago, when Tenet last indicated he wanted to leave, that Deputy Defense Secretary

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Paul Wolfowitz would be moved to CIA, but Washington insiders now say that Wolfowitz, the administration's highest-ranking neo-conservative and Chalabi's most effective champion, would not survive Senate confirmation hearings.

Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage has also expressed interest in the job in the past, but, as an unconditional ally and friend of Secretary of State Colin Powell, he would be a major target of right-wing Republican hawks and neo-conservatives, to the extent the latter retain much influence in the White House.

If Bush were to decide not to stick with McLaughlin, the likeliest candidate is the head of the Intelligence Committee in the House of Representatives, Porter Goss of Florida. While a Republican loyalist, Goss, a former CIA officer himself, has had generally good relations with Democratic colleagues and is not considered particularly ideological.

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