



Bush Says He Declassified Intelligence

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) - President George W. Bush acknowledged on Monday he ordered the declassification of parts of a prewar intelligence report on Iraq to respond to critics who alleged he manipulated intelligence to justify the war.

Bush offered his first comment on a prosecutor's disclosure last week that he authorized Vice President Dick Cheney's former top aide, Lewis "Scooter" Libby, to declassify Iraq intelligence.

The disclosure prompted a firestorm of criticism from Democrats who charged Bush was a hypocrite who denounces leaks of information while becoming the "leaker-in-chief." A Republican ally, Pennsylvania Sen. Arlen Specter, urged Bush on Sunday to "tell the American people exactly what happened."

At issue is the administration's release in July 2003 of parts of an October 2002 National Intelligence Estimate that alleged Iraq under Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction and was trying to develop a nuclear weapon.

Bush said he declassified parts of the document to answer questions raised about why the United States invaded Iraq.

"I wanted people to see what some of those statements were based on. I wanted people to see the truth. I thought it made sense for people to see the truth. That's why I declassified the document," he said.

Bush, answering questions from an audience after a speech in Washington, would not comment on the allegation that he authorized Libby to release the information to reporters.

But a senior administration official said Bush did not designate Libby or anyone else to release the information, trying to distance Bush from any tactical decisions made on how to release the information.

The White House release of the parts of the National Intelligence Estimate came in response to charges from former ambassador Joe Wilson that Bush had manipulated intelligence to justify the war.

Wilson later accused the White House of leaking the identity of his wife, who was then a CIA officer, Valerie Plame, to retaliate against him.

Libby is accused of obstruction of justice and perjury in an investigation designed to discover who leaked Plame's name.

White House officials have stressed that Bush was well within his legal authority to declassify the document.

The new controversy erupted as Bush seeks to rebound from weak poll numbers and tries to bolster sagging American support for the Iraq war.

Specter, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, said on "Fox News Sunday" that Bush owed "a specific explanation to the American people" of what happened.

"The president has the authority to declassify information. So in a technical sense, if he looked at it, he could say this is declassified, and make a disclosure of it," he said.

Wilson, speaking on ABC's "This Week," called on Bush to release transcripts of his and Cheney's testimony to the prosecutor.

"It seems to me it is long past time for the White House to come clean on all of this," he said.

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