

focus its attention on Saddam Hussein." The neocon-dominated Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs—where Perle, Feith, and Cheney all served on the board of advisors—had also worked closely for years with Chalabi. Its executive director, Tom Neumann, said, "It is a good idea for the American Jewish community to do anything it can to change the government of Iraq." Beginning in the mid-1990s, Chalabi and his crew of INC defectors were shunned by the CIA and the State Department. They considered him little more than a con man trying to wrangle large payments and to get them to start a war so he could be installed as president. In addition to his Jordanian bank-fraud conviction, he was unable to account for much of the money the CIA had given his group in the past.

The Pentagon, however, had a different agenda, and in the spring of 2002 both Wolfowitz and Rumsfeld began seeking Bush's intervention to grant Chalabi \$90 million from the Treasury. Although Congress had authorized \$97 million for Iraqi opposition groups under the 1998 Iraq Liberation Act, because of State Department objections most of that had not been expended. State had argued that it would be throwing good money after bad because Chalabi hadn't accounted for previous monies given to him.

"The [INC's] intelligence isn't reliable at all," said Vincent Cannistraro, the CIA's former chief of counterterrorism. "Much of it is propaganda. Much of it is telling the Defense Department what they want to hear. And much of it is used to support Chalabi's own presidential ambitions. They make no distinction between intelligence and propaganda, using alleged informants and defectors who say what Chalabi wants them to say, [creating] cooked information that goes right into presidential and vice-presidential speeches."

Nevertheless, to his fellow neocons now running the govern-

ment, Chalabi had always been their Iraqi "president in waiting," and the waiting was now over. Thus, a major effort was made to use Chalabi's unreliable defectors and hyped anti-Saddam charges to channel disinformation to the media and help sell their war to the American public through the press.

One of their biggest coups came in 2001 when Chalabi offered *The New York Times's* Judith Miller a worldwide print exclusive opportunity to interview a recent Iraqi defector then living in exile in Thailand. The man, an engineer named Adnan Ishaq Saeed al-Haidari, claimed that he had personal knowledge of hundreds of bunkers for chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons research hidden throughout Iraq. Some of them, he said, he helped build himself. Among the locations was one located beneath Baghdad hospital and others in Saddam's presidential compounds.

At the same time, a similar exclusive TV deal was offered to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation through freelance telejournalist Paul Moran. It was expected that hundreds of both print and television organizations around the world would quickly latch on to the story and start an avalanche of publicity, greatly influencing public opinion against Iraq.

But it was later discovered that Moran was anything but a disinterested journalist. It turns out he had previously worked extensively for Chalabi and the INC, making anti-Saddam propaganda films. Worse, he also worked for a shadowy American company, The Rendon Group, that had been paid close to \$200 million by the CIA and Pentagon to spread anti-Saddam propaganda worldwide.

The firm is headed by John W. Rendon, a rumpus man often seen in a beret and military fatigues, who calls himself "an information warrior and a perception manager." Its specialty is manipulating thought and spreading propaganda. Working quietly for the American government, Rendon's company has played roles in the toppling of Panama's President Manuel Noriega, the first Gulf

War, the Balkans, and Haiti. "They're very closemouthed about what they do," said Kevin McCauley, one of the editors of *ODwyer's PR Daily*. "It's all cloak-and-dagger stuff."

Soon after the attacks of September 11, the company received a \$100,000-a-month contract from the Pentagon to offer media strategy advice. Among the agencies to whom it provided recommendations was the Orwellian-sounding Office of Strategic Influence, another Feith creation that was apparently intended to be a massive disinformation factory. "When I get their briefings," said one senior official, "it's scary." As a storm of protests began to mount, Torie Clarke, the Pentagon's chief spokeswoman and Deputy Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs, warned Feith of "blowback." She argued that OSI would undermine "the trust, credibility, and transparency of our access to media."

The Rendon Group has taken in a great deal of cash vilifying Saddam Hussein. In 1991, following the Gulf War, President George H. W. Bush signed a presidential order directing the CIA to launch a covert operation to undermine the Iraqi leader. The CIA, in turn, passed along a sizable amount of money to The Rendon Group to turn world opinion against Hussein.

One of the company's first actions was to create the Iraqi National Congress, a name they came up with, as a Hussein opposition group; and in October 1992, Rendon protégé Ahmed Chalabi was placed in charge of the group. The covert operation was run out of an office in London, on Catherine Place near Buckingham Palace. "The INC was clueless. They needed a lot of help and didn't know where to start," said Thomas Twetten, the CIA's former deputy director of operations.

The man helping to arrange the al-Haideri interviews in Thailand for Moran and Miller was INC media spokesman Zaab Sethna. He had a similar background steeped in American-spon-

sored anti-Saddam propaganda. Sethna and Moran had met about a decade earlier in Kuwait. Following the Gulf War, they were asked by The Rendon Group to work as propagandists for the INC as contract employees. "He continued to work with The Rendon Group over the years," said Sethna about Moran, who died in March 2003 as result of a suicide bombing in Sullymania, Iraq, where he was on assignment for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Among those at the funeral was John Rendon, who had flown halfway around the world to pay his respects.

Unlike Moran, there is no indication that the Judith Miller of *The New York Times* was connected in any way to The Rendon Group. Nevertheless, her closeness to both Chalabi and the Pentagon has raised a number of eyebrows. While covering the search for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, one military officer complained that Miller sometimes "intimidates Army soldiers by invoking Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld or Undersecretary Douglas Feith." And *The Washington Post's* media critic, Howard Kurtz, asked, "Could Chalabi have been using the *Times* to build a drumbeat that Iraq was hiding weapons of mass destruction?"

In the end, nothing was found, not a single bunker. Al-Haideri claimed that the evidence had probably been moved. "Well, gosh, how do you move an underground facility?" laughed Scott Ritter, a former UN weapons inspector in Iraq. "It's the classic defense of the fabricator to say, 'Well, they're moving it, they're hiding it.'"

Ritter said he used to hear the same excuses from Chalabi when Ritter worked as a weapons inspector in Iraq. "That was what Ahmed Chalabi always told us every time we uncovered his data to be inaccurate," said Ritter. "He said, 'Well, they changed scenes, they're too clever for us, they're too fast, they respond too quickly.' No Ahmed, no Mr. al-Haideri, you're just liars. And it's

time the world faced up to that—they're liars, they misled us, and they have the blood of hundreds of brave Americans and British service members on their hands and thousands of innocent Iraqis who perished in a war that didn't need to be fought."

The entire story may have been little more than a U.S.-sponsored psychological warfare effort—The Rendon Group's specialty—to gin up the American public's fear over Saddam Hussein. If so, it would have been illegal under U.S. law, which forbids the use of taxpayer money to propagandize the American public. "I think what you're seeing," said Ritter, "is the need for the United States government to turn to commercial enterprises like The Rendon Group to do the kind of lying and distortion of truth in terms of peddling disinformation to the media that the government normally can't do for itself."

Having largely shunned the CIA's analysis, the Pentagon's top leadership was instead dependent on selectively culled intelligence from Wurmser, a man who had long pushed his own radical agenda for the Middle East, and the bogus information from Chalabi and his defectors. It was a dangerous exercise in self-deception. Their task now was to frighten and deceive the rest of the country, and there was no better way than with the image of a madman a few screws away from a nuclear bomb. Like perfect timing, a man in Rome turned up with the proof.

In the fall of 2001, as George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair began working together to build a coalition of support for a war in Iraq, a shadowy meeting took place amid the noisy espresso bars and busy trattorias in central Rome. A few days earlier, a mysterious call had been received at Italy's Military Intelligence and Security Service, the SISMI. Someone was offering to sell information on Iraq's efforts to regenerate its nuclear

weapons program through the purchase of tons of uranium from Niger, a small West African country known for its poverty and expensive rocks.

Off and on for decades, the Niger embassy had been a key target of the SISMI's eavesdroppers. A cluttered apartment behind an armored door, it was located on the sixth floor of 10 Via Antonio Baionte in the bustling Mazzini district of Rome. As the third-most-important country in the world for export of yellowcake—milled uranium oxide, a key ingredient for nuclear weapons—the apartment occasionally provided a keyhole for spies into the world of nuclear proliferation.

Nearly two decades earlier, in 1983, a telephone tap led to the SISMI discovering a failed Iraq bid to buy Niger uranium. Earlier, in 1981 or 1982, Iraq did legally acquire 2.8 kilograms of the ore. Following the Gulf War, United Nations weapons inspectors completely dismantled and demolished Iraq's nascent nuclear program. Now someone was offering evidence that Iraq was looking to rebuild its atomic infrastructure—there was no other use for yellowcake.

Months earlier, over the long New Year's holiday, the Niger embassy suffered a break-in. When the staff arrived at work on the morning of January 2, 2001, the office looked like an earthquake had struck. Papers covered the gloomy corridor between the ambassador's office and those of the political advisor. Drawers had been pulled out and dumped upside down. Closets had been broken into, file cabinets torn open, and folders tossed about. Arfou Mounkaila, the second secretary, reported the crime to the carabinieri. But the thieves seemed to have been more interested in paper than property, since the only objects that appeared stolen were a Breil steel watch and three small vials of perfume.

At the meeting that fall, the mysterious individual handed

the agents from the SISMI a thick packet of documents in exchange for cash. It was an odd collection: a codebook; a series of letters laying the groundwork for a 1999 visit to Niger by Wissam al-Zahawiah, Iraq's ambassador to the Holy See; and a few telexes. Among them was one with the heading "005/99/ABNI/Rome," addressed to Niger's foreign minister. "I beg to bring it to your attention," it said, "that the Iraqi Embassy to the Holy See has informed me that His Excellency Wissam al-Zahawiah, Iraqi ambassador to the Holy See, will make an official visit to our country in his capacity as representative of Saddam, president of the Iraqi Republic. His excellency Zahawiah will be arriving in Niamey," the capital of Niger.

Back at Forte Braschi, the SISMI headquarters in Rome, the telex matched one that the SISMI had secretly intercepted several years earlier. That, plus the codebook, was grounds to believe the material was authentic.

But the most troubling documents were more recent and dealt with a 2000 deal by Iraq to purchase tons of uranium. There was a July 30, 1999, message requesting an "answer on the uranium supply," and a confidential memo dated three days earlier referring to the deal—No. 381-NI 2000—for the "supply of 500 tonnes of uranium."

Finally, there was the three-page memorandum of understanding between the two countries on the uranium. Dated July 6, 2000, and signed by Niger President Tandja Mamadou and Allele Habibou, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, it noted that the deal for the five hundred tons of uranium oxide was legal and authorized under the Niger constitution of 1965. An accompanying letter of October 10 said it was being sent for information to the ambassador in Rome from the foreign ministry.

According to the documents, the five hundred tons of uranium was to be shipped "secretly by sea" on a Gabon-flagged ship.

Then it was supposed to be "transshipped in international waters." Apparently, this meant that somehow, while two ships were bobbing alongside each other more than a dozen miles out in the ocean, five hundred tons of metal would be moved from one ship to another—an amazing feat. The uranium was supposedly shipped on August 28 and would have arrived around the time of September 11.

"Very good work done together with the personal emissary of the Iraqi president," said the document. "It's understood that this information is top secret and personal. Be on guard as far as all embassy personnel are concerned." Despite the Top Secret warning, however, the document was stamped only "Confidential."

With little analysis, the intelligence experts should surely have seen the trapdoors hidden in the documents. A letter dated July 30, 1999, actually refers in the past tense to supposed deals agreed to in Niamey a year later, on June 29, 2000. And the October 10 letter had the heading "Conseil Militaire Supreme," an organization that went out of existence in May 1989. The signature was that of Minister of Foreign Affairs Allele Habibou, who held the post from 1988 to 1989 and had been out of office for more than a decade. And finally, while the letter was dated October 10, it was supposedly stamped as received in Rome on September 28—thus, it was received about two weeks before it was ever sent, another form of magic.

Also, the agreement signed by President Mamadou says the transaction was approved under the May 12, 1965, constitution, but a new constitution was promulgated on August 9, 1999, and the presidential signature bore little resemblance to that of the real Tandja Mamadou. At the same time, the forger used an inaccurate representation of the national emblem.

And a September 3, 2001, document attempting to show a connection to the attacks appears identical to the document out-

lining the ambassador's previous 1999 trip—same flight and time. The only thing that was changed was the date at the top of the page. Also, by September 4, 2001, al-Zahawiah was no longer ambassador, a slight problem.

The letters were obviously a blend of several genuine older documents, possibly obtained during the earlier break-in, which were used to masquerade the counterfeit newer ones. The purpose of the phony documents was to create the impression that the true purpose of the Iraqi ambassador's trip to Niger in 1999 was to secretly arrange a large shipment of uranium to Iraq in 2000 and that he may have had something to do with the attacks of 9/11. Both were exactly what the Bush administration was trying to convey to the American public.

In fact, al-Zahawiah's trip had nothing to do with uranium. After the United Nations inspectors destroyed all remnants of the atomic development program in the early 1990s, Iraq never actively pursued nuclear weapons again. Instead, the Iraqi ambassador was hoping to persuade heads of state in a number of West African countries to travel to Baghdad and thereby break the air embargo that had long been strangling the country. Libya's ruler, Muammar Ghaddafi, had earlier engaged in a similar tactic, and as a result a number of West African leaders flew to Tripoli and broke the embargo.

At 6:25 P.M. on the evening of February 5, 1999, Air France Flight 730 touched down at Niamey's airport. It was the first stop on al-Zahawiah's whirlwind trip that would also take him to Benin, Burkina-Faso, and Congo-Brazzaville. The next day, he spent an hour meeting with Niger's then president, Ibrahim Bare Mainassara, who agreed to pay a visit to Baghdad—the only leader on the trip to do so. But prior to his scheduled visit, he was cut down by an assassin in April 1999. The entire trip took only a few days, and he was soon back in Rome. "I took it to be a routine

assignment," al-Zahawiah said in 2003. "I had done this sort of thing before, and I was senior in the Foreign Ministry." Having first entered the Foreign Service in 1955, when the monarchy was in power, he retired to Jordan in 2000.

Some Italian officials have suggested that the seller was an "African diplomat." But it was unlikely anyone from the Niger embassy, because of the numerous mistakes and the sloppy way the documents were put together. However, the person had to have had access to some actual documents. From those documents, they would know of the trip by al-Zahawiah to Niger. With just some creative energy, a complex conspiracy could be created.

It may be that the stolen documents had been floating around in the netherworld of thieves and con men for months before someone thought of a scheme to use them. Intelligence services are often the target of elaborate scams. For a number of years, con men around the world, including in the United States, tried to sell phony information to spy agencies about a supposedly plutonium-like substance called "red mercury." On the other hand, it is not out of the question that a more sinister motive may have been behind the deal. Groups like the INC were desperately trying to get the United States and Britain to go to war with Iraq so they could assume power, and deception was a frequently used tactic.

In any case, the SISMI passed on details of the supposed Iraq-Niger deal to the Executive Committee of the Intelligence and Security Services (CESIS), which in turn passed it on to the Farnesina, the Italian Foreign Ministry, and to Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi at his office in Rome's Palazzo Chigi. Only the Farnesina raised "strong objections" and "reservations" about the report—primarily from the African Countries Directorate. They were greatly concerned about the reliability of the information.

Nevertheless, the SISMI quickly got in touch with their British MI-6 liaison and, following a number of meetings in Rome

and London, passed on a summary of the information, indicating that the source was "reliable." "The British bought it without assessing it in any way," said one SISMI official. Both MI-6 and the SISMI then passed the same summary on to the CIA.

In the world of espionage, information is the coin of the realm, and the more you give the more you get. "Reciprocal exchange of information," it is called. In the early fall of 2001, the SISMI certainly knew how valuable confirmation of an Iraqi nuclear deal would be for two countries looking for a war. At the same time, it is also standard practice to seldom pass on either details of how the information was obtained or actual copies of the raw documents—only a summary of the information contained in them. The documents themselves, and how they were obtained, may reveal the source, something that most intelligence professionals are extremely careful about.

At CIA, the item from Italy was not given much prominence. It was thirdhand information without any corroboration, and on its face seemed improbable. It was certainly not solid enough to include in the President's Daily Brief. Nevertheless, what was fool's gold to the CIA was real gold to the Feith-Wurmser intelligence unit, which quickly and secretly passed the item on to Vice President Cheney.

The next morning, during his regular CIA intelligence briefing, the Niger item was not included. Nevertheless, Cheney himself brought up the topic and asked the briefer to get him more information. A day or so later, the briefer came back and said there was such a report but that there were few other details. As background he was told that Iraq had acquired a large supply of uranium ore from Niger in the early 1980s but that following the Gulf War, the material was seized and placed under the protection of the United Nations.

Spurred on by Cheney's interest, the CIA began giving the

highly questionable Niger item more prominence. On January 30, 2002, the agency issued an unclassified report to Congress containing the phrase "Baghdad may be attempting to acquire materials that could aid in reconstituting its nuclear-weapons program." Still, it was not highlighted and it was couched in very ambiguous-sounding language.

Yet only a week or so later, in early February, as the item moved from intelligence professionals to the Bush inner circle, it made a Herculean leap in credibility. Speaking before a House International Relations Committee, Secretary of State Colin Powell declared, "With respect to the nuclear program, there is no doubt that the Iraqis are pursuing it." In fact, there was every doubt.

It was a reckless charge. Even Powell's own intelligence agency at State, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), thought the Italian intelligence report was junk and sent him a memo saying so. At the time, Greg Thielmann was a senior official in INR. "A whole lot of things told us that the report was bogus," he later said. "This wasn't highly contested. There weren't strong advocates on the other side. It was done, shot down."

At the CIA, the item was still on the bottom rung of the credibility ladder. "The DO thought this smelled," said one official. Nevertheless, as a result of Cheney's unusual special interest, it was decided to give it the equivalent of a quick diagnostic check rather than expend the time and money on a full-scale clandestine operation. The idea was to get someone from the agency's retirement community with African experience to go to Niger and check it out.

Hearing about the suggestion was Valerie E. Wilson, a DO employee whose husband, Joseph Wilson, had been a former ambassador to nearby Gabon and served in Niger and in several other African countries. He had also served as an envoy to Iraq. For many years, Valerie Wilson worked for the agency in the non-

official cover (NOC) program, often under her maiden name, Plame. According to a congressional intelligence source, hers was one of the names that former CIA employee, and longtime Russian mole, Aldrich Ames turned over to the KGB.

Later, Plame worked as a case officer in Europe, and more recently was assigned to the nonproliferation division. There she posed as an energy analyst for a nonexistent front company known as Brewster-Jennings & Associates, located in Boston. In reality, her job was as a weapons proliferation analyst. Wilson suggested that her husband might be a good candidate for the brief, nonpaying check-out mission to Niger, and he was given the assignment. "Rather than waste a lot of time on this caper, this was a way to find out quickly if it merited more effort," said one intelligence official.

"The agency officials asked if I would travel to Niger to check out the story so they could provide a response to the Vice President's office," said Joseph Wilson. "In late February 2002, I arrived in Niger's capital, Niamey. . . . The city was much as I remembered it. Seasonal winds had clogged the air with dust and sand. Through the haze, I could see camel caravans crossing the Niger River [over the John F. Kennedy Bridge], the setting sun behind them. Most people had wrapped scarves around their faces to protect against the grit, leaving only their eyes visible."

The next morning, Wilson met with U.S. Ambassador Owens-Kirkpatrick at the embassy. "For reasons that are understandable, the embassy staff has always kept a close eye on Niger's uranium business," he said. "I was not surprised, then, when the ambassador told me that she knew about the allegations of uranium sales to Iraq—and that she felt she had already debunked them in her reports to Washington. Nevertheless, she and I agreed that my time would be best spent interviewing people who had been in government when the deal supposedly took place, which was before her arrival."

Over the next eight days, Wilson sipped sweet mint tea and chatted with several dozen people, from current officials to businesspeople associated with the uranium mines. "It did not take long to conclude that it was highly doubtful that any such consortiums that operated the mines, it would be exceedingly difficult for Niger to transfer uranium to Iraq."

The government of Niger is not in control of the uranium. Instead, the nation's two mines, Somair and Cominak, are run by a French, Spanish, Japanese, German, and Nigerian consortium. From the time the ore is extracted from the ground; packed in hermetically sealed, numbered, and dated drums; and transported to Benin, where it is loaded onto ships, it is heavily guarded by gendarmes and the International Atomic Energy Agency.

"If the government wanted to remove uranium from a mine," said Wilson, "it would have to notify the consortium, which in turn is strictly monitored by the International Atomic Energy Agency. Moreover, because the two mines are closely regulated, quasigovernmental entities, selling uranium would require the approval of the minister of mines, the prime minister, and probably the president. In short, there's simply too much oversight over too small an industry for a sale to have transpired."

Wilson returned to Washington in early March and verbally gave his negative assessment to CIA officials, and later met with the State Department's African Affairs Bureau. There was no substance to the Italian intelligence report. On March 9, the CIA cabled Wilson's doubts around the intelligence community and passed a memo with his comments to the White House.

As the move toward war began gaining momentum in late August 2002, Feith created another new organization, the Office of Special Plans. Its purpose was to conduct advance war planning for Iraq,