Syria & Chemical Weapons : Post-Bush Intelligence Vetting Category Banishes Meaning

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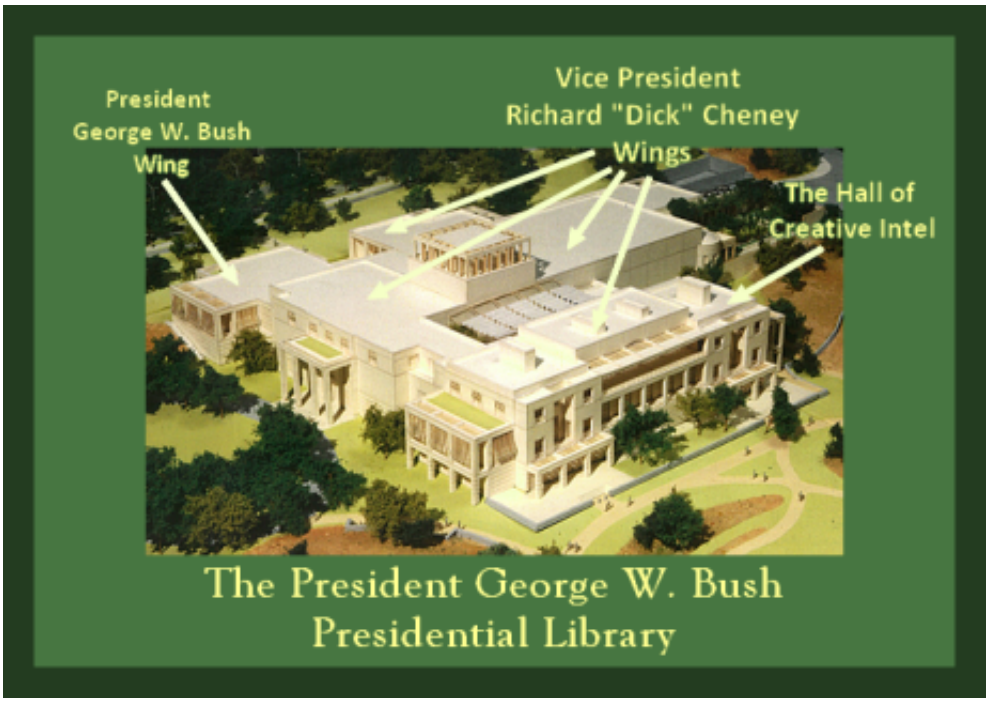

Michael Matthew Bloomer, April 26, 2013

Last night, from Abu Dhabi, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel revealed certain intelligence assessments of Syria's suspected use of chemical weapons against Syrian rebels and civilians, or at least for a moment it seemed like he did:

"This morning, the White House delivered -- delivered a letter to several members of Congress on the topic of chemical weapons used in Syria. The letter, which will be made available to you here shortly -- as soon as George gets it, we'll get it to you -- states that *the U.S. intelligence community assesses with some degree of varying confidence* that the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons on a small scale in Syria, specifically the chemical agent sarin." [Italics added; for compete text and accompanying story]

We absolutely positively without a scintilla of doubt have some degree of varying confidence. Thus we have an official definitive conclusion that Syria's Assad regime may or may not have used deadly chemical weapons on its own people, perhaps as far as we know.

The White House letter Hagel referenced provided more detail about the alleged use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime, and included this:

"Given the stakes involved, *and what we have learned from our own recent experience*, intelligence assessments alone are not sufficient – only credible and corroborated facts that provide us with some degree of certainty will guide our decision-making..." [Italics added; for complete text]

In the muddy wake of the Bush-Cheney era public confidence in intelligence gathering is in free fall. And that's another national security legacy bequeathed to future administrations Bush administration manipulation, undercutting, and bullying of intelligence professionals, as well as their simply creating intel as it suited them, or endangering overseas covert agents and intelligence sources by outing Valerie Plame.

Surely, suspicions about intelligence gathering and the gatherers themselves are always appropriate. Nonetheless, since around September 12, 2001, many of us rarely believe *anything* "intel" we encounter, especially regarding the Middle East. Call us paranoid, but that overwhelming disbelief reaction is, in itself, a national security threat created by a Bush administration outspokenly devoted *über alles* to national security. And *that* truly is ironic, is it not? As some celebrate the opening of George W. Bush's Presidential Library it bears noting that his acquiescence in the careless abandon of Cheney, Rumsfeld, Tenet, and the rest leaves us at this low point of confidence in any intelligence assessments.

A body blow to meaning. Yesterday, the Secretary of Defense demonstrated the exceptionally difficult semantic challenge our language creates as a result of the Bush cadre's assault on truth and promotion of propaganda. Hagel was nearly struck dumb when trying to communicate meaning even at a minimal level: *"the U.S. intelligence community assesses with some degree of varying confidence."* Really? Why are you telling us this? Increasingly, to speak intelligibly of intelligence assessments - pardon the pun - is becoming nearly impossible. When this occurs, meaning disappears in a cloud of hedging. The public, more skeptical than usual, needs ever more reassurance that the Obama administration is taking enough care in its handling of intel to not be mistaken for the Bush administration, or for the president whose library was dedicated that very day.

Bush and Company have set back by perhaps a generation or more citizen confidence in intelligence findings to a point where it poses real danger to decision-making when the threats are actually and truly real. There ought to be a special place in Dubya's library devoted to his administration's accomplishments in this field, don't you think?

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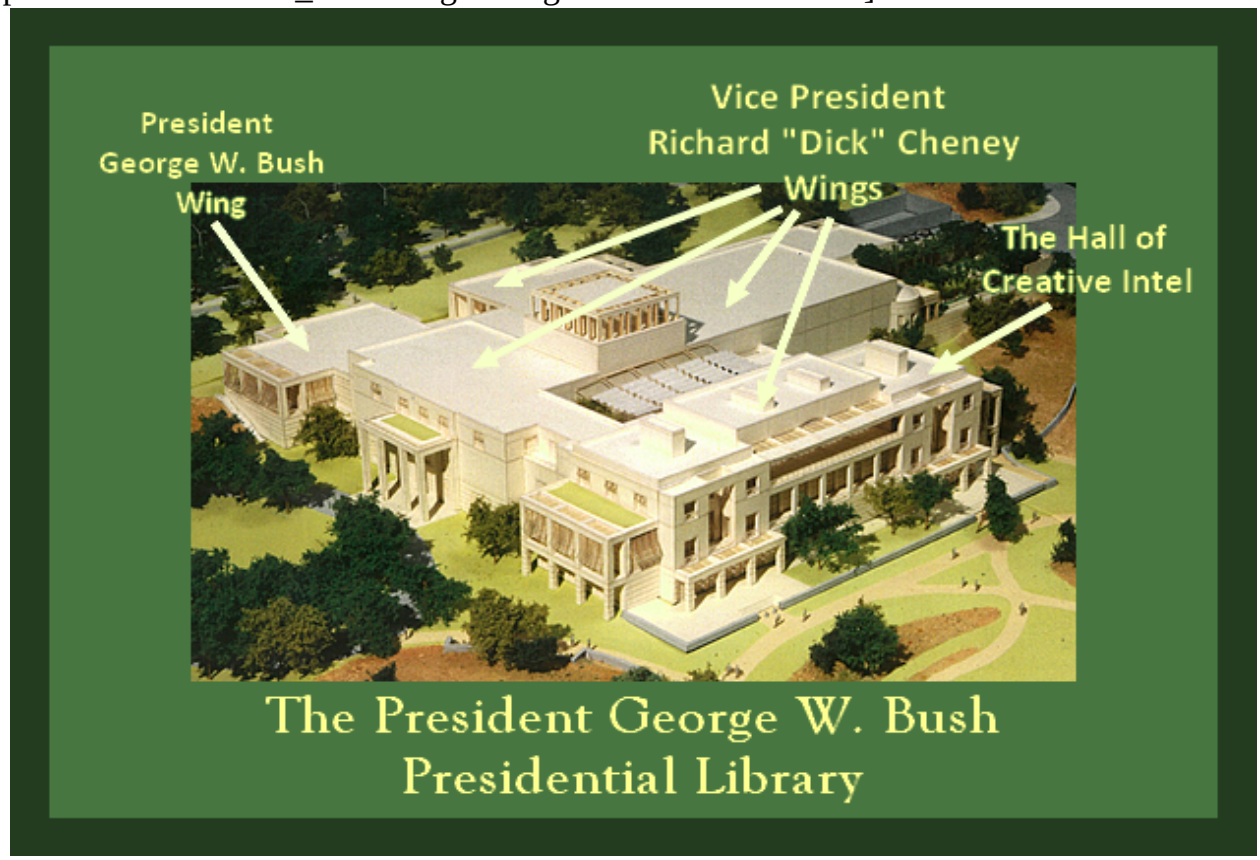

Coming soon! The Donald Rumsfeld Cafeteria and Vomitorium[/caption]