
Book Review

Cooking the Books For an Unjust War

by Jeffrey Steinberg

The Italian Letter: How the Bush Administration Used a Fake Letter to Build the Case for War in Iraq

by Peter Eisner and Knut Royce

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268 pages, hardbound, \$24.95

Peter Eisner and Knut Royce have written a profoundly important and disturbing account of how a cabal of neo-conservative ideologues in and around the offices of Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, lied America into the disastrous war in Iraq. Rather than attempting a broad panoramic account, the authors, both top-flight investigative journalists with major newspapers, with more than a half-century of experience between them, decided to spell out the story of a particularly vital piece of forged evidence—a letter purporting to show that the Saddam Hussein regime had struck a deal with the government of Niger to obtain vast quantities of “yellowcake” uranium to build a nuclear bomb. The so-called “Italian Letter,” which was passed to the Bush Administration by the Italian intelligence service SISMI, was a cornerstone of the propaganda drive during 2002-2003, which deceived both the U.S. Congress and the American people into believing that Iraq was aggressively pursuing nuclear weapons, that would be used against American interests, or, even worse, shared with al-Qaeda terrorists. Hence the need to launch a preemptive war to overthrow Saddam Hussein.

The Italian Letter has all of the excitement of a John le Carré novel, with the added virtue that it is based exclusively on true events, impeccably researched, and coherently presented. Through the prism of the forged documents, the reader is given an insightful picture of a policy-making process gone terribly wrong; and an intelligence community intimidated by policy-makers into fudging and faking the truth, to provide a rationale for a policy decision long-since made.

Good Journalism and Good Intelligence

Before Peter Eisner and Knut Royce took up the challenge of investigating and reporting on the “Italian Letter,” a great deal had already been written about the role of the forged Niger documents, in making the case for war. A great deal of speculation had spread around about the origins of the forged letters, and much of the speculation had the virtue of painting a very sexy picture about intrigues involving some of the leading American neo-conservatives, Iraqi “Contra” leader Ahmed Chalabi, and some of the nastiest of the Pentagon warhawks.

Much of the speculation centered around the person of Michael Ledeen, the self-professed “universal fascist,” who had a long history of collusion with the Italian spook circles described by authors Eisner and Royce as the “deviated service,” a parallel corrupt intelligence apparatus, penetrated into every level of the SISMI and other Italian intelligence services. The “deviated service” overlapped the Propaganda Two (P2) Freemasonic Lodge of former wartime Nazi/Fascist operative Licio Gelli, who, to this day, is alive and active in the sewers that link elements of the Italian security services with extreme right-wing political circles that yearn for the return of “Il Duce.”

Other tantalizing versions of the Niger forgeries story implicated Iraqi National Congress fraudster Chalabi, former Iran-Contra CIA officer Duane Claridge, Bush-Cheney White House Terrorism Czar Gen. Wayne Downing, and Pentagon officials Harold Rhode and convicted Israeli spy Larry Franklin.

In each instance, there were tantalizing hints, suggesting that the grand theory was valid. As authors Eisner and Royce note, Michael Ledeen, Harold Rhode, and Larry Franklin were in Rome, Italy during a crucial period of time, in the Autumn-Winter of 2001, when details of the forged Niger documents first surfaced in the hands of SISMI officials. Ledeen, by his own admission, had been, at times, a contract security consultant to various Italian ministries and intelligence services.

Unfortunately, none of these sexy versions of the “Italian Letter” story have panned out—so far.

This is an important point—and a significant selling card for the Eisner-Royce book. Good investigative journalism, like good intelligence work, requires a level of intellectual honesty, as well as a good deal of rigor and doggedness in pursuit of all leads. Perhaps the most damning indictment of the Bush-Cheney White House, along with elements of the intelligence community, that comes out of *The Italian Letter*, is the fact that there was a near-compulsive willingness to selectively report facts to fit a predetermined picture. At the White House and the Pentagon, Cheney and his apparatus, waged war against anyone who surfaced a shred of intelligence that contradicted their predetermined drive for war with Iraq. As authors Eisner and Royce amply document, the

overwhelming preponderance of true intelligence revealed that there was never any justification for the invasion of Iraq.

In stark contrast to the Cheney cabal's perversion of the truth-seeking process that is at the heart of good intelligence work, the authors of *The Italian Letter* avoided all temptations to sensationalize the story, and stuck to the truth, even when it presented a very different account than the "Ledeen and the neo-cons and Chalabi did it" version that would have been the seeds of a runaway best-seller.

This said, *The Italian Letter* provides the reader with a very rigorous, well-composed account of one of the most damning intelligence hoaxes in modern history—a hoax that played a far-too-important role in the Bush-Cheney Administration's drive for war against Iraq.

There are, furthermore, some real bombshells sprinkled throughout the book's 241 pages, that go beyond all previously published accounts of the Niger forgeries.

Iraq's Man at the Vatican

"The Italian Letter" was a forged document from the government of the African state of Niger, that purported to contract the delivery of 500 tons per year of yellowcake uranium to Iraq. The document, dated July 27, 2000, was part of a larger cache of forged and stolen documents that were passed to *Panorama* journalist Elisabetta Burba by a SISMI informant named Rocco Martino, in Rome, on Oct. 7, 2002. A year earlier, on Oct. 15, 2001, officials of the SISMI had provided the CIA station in Rome with a report on the alleged Niger-Iraq yellowcake deal, which CIA officials had greeted with skepticism, but had reported back to Washington. In the immediate aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks in Washington and New York City, no such sensational intelligence lead would have been dismissed outright.

Among the allegations bolstering the claims of Iraqi-Nigerean collusion in a clandestine nuclear weapons program was a report that a top Iraqi diplomat, involved in the secret arms program, had led a delegation to Niger in 1999. Indeed, Wissam al-Zahawie, the Iraqi Ambassador to the Vatican, had made a diplomatic visit to Niger on Feb. 5, 1999. But any connection to the alleged yellowcake plot ended there.

Despite various media claims that al-Zahawie was a specialist in nuclear weapons, and was part of Saddam Hussein's inner circle, delegated to boost Iraq's nuclear weapons ambitions, the fact is: The diplomatic mission to Niger and to several other African countries in 1999 was part of an effort to win Third World support for an end to United Nations sanctions on Iraq, following the "Operation Desert Fox" bombing campaign by the United States in late 1998. The urbane, English-speaking al-Zahawie had never been a member of the Ba'ath Party, had been in the Iraqi diplomatic corp since 1955, and had sought out the Vatican posting because it was devoid of intrigue. In fact, the entire embassy to the Vatican consisted of al-Zahawie and a secretary/assistant.

In a series of e-mail exchanges with the authors, al-Zahawie recounted his mission to Niger; and U.S. Embassy files from 1999 reflected the accuracy of his account. Al-Zahawie made it clear that he had no background on Africa, knew nothing about Niger, and had no idea that the impoverished African state had uranium deposits. Nevertheless, war propagandists like British journalist Christopher Hitchens made a brief splash with accusations that al-Zahawie was Saddam's "main man" on nuclear weapons, and, swimming in the gutter, accused the Iraqi diplomat of being a "Jew-hater." The "proof"? He had attended the Bayreuth Wagner festival with a German diplomat—the same Wagner festival that Hitler had attended in the 1930s.

It is these sorts of well-researched and otherwise unknown details that make *The Italian Letter* a particularly delightful indictment of the Cheney-Rumsfeld cabal.

CIA Not Let Off the Hook

While much of the story of the Niger yellowcake hoax centers on the obsessive drive to war by senior Administration officials, led by Cheney and Rumsfeld, the Eisner-Royce account hardly lets the CIA and other intelligence organizations off the hook, for their own failures and complicities.

The Italian Letter provides the most comprehensive non-classified account to date of the role of the CIA's Weapons Intelligence, Nonproliferation and Arms Control Center (WINPAC), in fueling the Iraq nuclear hoax. Not only was WINPAC chief Alan Foley a full partner in the White House neo-con campaign to justify the war with the frightening image of nuclear "mushroom clouds"—he colluded with NSC arms control officer Dr. Robert Joseph in penning the now infamous "16 words" in President Bush's 2003 State of the Union Address, citing British reports that "Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa." Foley frankly admitted to colleagues, as reported in *The Italian Letter*, that he knew prior to the Iraq invasion that there would be no WMD found there. Foley, according to the authors, was one CIA "careerist" who shamelessly sold out to White House policy-makers who were hell-bent on war, and only wished to see intelligence that bolstered the case for invasion. Given that the entire rationale for war centered around the bogus claim that Saddam Hussein was on the verge of obtaining a nuclear bomb, Foley's failure to "speak truth to power" was a colossal sellout.

With the issue of Vice Presidential impeachment now squarely on the table, *The Italian Letter* is not only a very good read, it forms a vital part of the evidence that should be presented before the House of Representatives, leading to the removal of Dick Cheney from office for high crimes and misdemeanors. It is a matter of patriotic duty for all serious citizens to study this book, to assure that our nation never again marches down the path to war on the basis of forged documents and willful lies.