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Ex-C.I.A. Chief, in Book, Assails Cheney on Iraq

By [SCOTT SHANE](#) and [MARK MAZZETTI](#)

Correction Appended

WASHINGTON, April 26 — [George J. Tenet](#), the former director of central intelligence, has lashed out against Vice President [Dick Cheney](#) and other Bush administration officials in a new book, saying they pushed the country to war in [Iraq](#) without ever conducting a “serious debate” about whether [Saddam Hussein](#) posed an imminent threat to the United States.

The 549-page book, “At the Center of the Storm,” is to be published by HarperCollins on Monday. By turns accusatory, defensive, and modestly self-critical, it is the first detailed account by a member of the president’s inner circle of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the decision to invade Iraq and the failure to find the unconventional weapons that were a major justification for the war.

“There was never a serious debate that I know of within the administration about the imminence of the Iraqi threat,” Mr. Tenet writes in a devastating judgment that is likely to be debated for many years. Nor, he adds, “was there ever a significant discussion” about the possibility of containing Iraq without an invasion.

Mr. Tenet admits that he made his famous “slam dunk” remark about the evidence that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. But he argues that the quote was taken out of context and that it had little impact on President Bush’s decision to go to war. He also makes clear his bitter view that the administration made him a scapegoat for the Iraq war.

A copy of the book was purchased at retail price in advance of publication by a reporter for The New York Times. Mr. Tenet described with sarcasm watching an episode of “Meet the Press” last September in which Mr. Cheney twice referred to Mr. Tenet’s “slam dunk” remark as the basis for the decision to go to war.

“I remember watching and thinking, ‘As if you needed me to say ‘slam dunk’ to convince you to go to war with Iraq,’ ” Mr. Tenet writes.

As violence in Iraq spiraled beginning in late 2003, Mr. Tenet writes, “rather than acknowledge responsibility, the administration’s message was: Don’t blame us. George Tenet and the [C.I.A.](#) got us into this mess.”

Mr. Tenet takes blame for the flawed 2002 National Intelligence Estimate about Iraq’s weapons programs, calling the episode “one of the lowest moments of my seven-year tenure.” He expresses regret that the document was not more nuanced, but says there was no doubt in his mind at the time that Saddam Hussein possessed unconventional weapons. “In retrospect, we got it wrong partly because the truth was so implausible,” he writes.

Despite such sweeping indictments, Mr. Bush, who in 2004 awarded Mr. Tenet a Presidential Medal of Freedom, is portrayed personally in a largely positive light, with particular praise for his leadership after the 2001 attacks. "He was absolutely in charge, determined, and directed," Mr. Tenet writes of the president, whom he describes as a blunt-spoken kindred spirit.

But Mr. Tenet largely endorses the view of administration critics that Mr. Cheney and a handful of Pentagon officials, including [Paul D. Wolfowitz](#) and Douglas J. Feith, were focused on Iraq as a threat in late 2001 and 2002 even as Mr. Tenet and the C.I.A. concentrated mostly on [Al Qaeda](#).

Mr. Tenet describes helping to kill a planned speech by Mr. Cheney on the eve of the invasion because its claims of links between Al Qaeda and Iraq went "way beyond what the intelligence shows."

"Mr. President, we cannot support the speech and it should not be given," Mr. Tenet wrote that he told Mr. Bush. Mr. Cheney never delivered the remarks.

Mr. Tenet hints at some score-settling in the book. He describes in particular the extraordinary tension between him and [Condoleezza Rice](#), then national security adviser, and her deputy, Stephen J. Hadley, in internal debate over how the president came to say erroneously in his 2003 State of the Union address that Iraq was seeking uranium in Africa.

He describes an episode in 2003, shortly after he issued a statement taking partial responsibility for that error. He said he was invited over for a Sunday afternoon, back-patio lemonade by [Colin L. Powell](#), then secretary of state. Mr. Powell described what Mr. Tenet called "a lively debate" on Air Force One a few days before about whether the White House should continue to support Mr. Tenet as C.I.A. director.

"In the end, the president said yes, and said so publicly," Mr. Tenet wrote. "But Colin let me know that other officials, particularly the vice president, had quite another view."

He writes that the controversy over who was to blame for the State of the Union error was the beginning of the end of his tenure. After the finger-pointing between the White House and the C.I.A., he wrote, "My relationship with the administration was forever changed."

Mr. Tenet also says in the book that he had been "not at all sure I wanted to accept" the Medal of Freedom. He agreed after he saw that the citation "was all about the C.I.A.'s work against terrorism, not Iraq."

He also expresses skepticism about whether the increase in troops in Iraq will prove successful. "It may have worked more than three years ago," he wrote. "My fear is that sectarian violence in Iraq has taken on a life of its own and that U.S. forces are becoming more and more irrelevant to the management of that violence."

Mr. Tenet says he decided to write the memoir in part because the infamous "slam dunk" episode had come to define his tenure at C.I.A.

He gives a detailed account of the episode, which occurred during an Oval Office meeting in December 2002 when the administration was preparing to make public its case for war against Iraq.

During the meeting, the deputy C.I.A. director, John McLaughlin, unveiled a draft of a proposed public presentation that left the group unimpressed. Mr. Tenet recalls that Mr. Bush suggested that they could "add

punch” by bringing in lawyers trained to argue cases before a jury.

“I told the president that strengthening the public presentation was a ‘slam dunk,’ a phrase that was later taken completely out of context,” Mr. Tenet writes. “If I had simply said, ‘I’m sure we can do better,’ I wouldn’t be writing this chapter — or maybe even this book.”

Mr. Tenet has spoken rarely in public, and never so caustically, since stepping down in July 2004.

Asked about Mr. Tenet’s assertions, a White House spokesman, Gordon D. Johndroe, defended the prewar deliberations on Thursday. “The president made the decision to remove Saddam Hussein for a number of reasons, mainly the National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq and Saddam Hussein’s own actions, and only after a thorough and lengthy assessment of all available information as well as Congressional authorization,” the spokesman said.

The book recounts C.I.A. efforts to fight Al Qaeda in the years before the Sept. 11 attacks, and Mr. Tenet’s early warnings about [Osama bin Laden](#). He contends that the urgent appeals of the C.I.A. on terrorism received a lukewarm reception at the Bush White House through most of 2001.

“The bureaucracy moved slowly,” and only after the Sept. 11 attacks was the C.I.A. given the counterterrorism powers it had requested earlier in the year.

Mr. Tenet confesses to “a black, black time” two months after the 2001 attacks when, sitting in front of his house in his favorite Adirondack chair, he “just lost it.”

“I thought about all the people who had died and what we had been through in the months since,” he writes. “What am I doing here? Why me?” Mr. Tenet gives a vigorous defense of the C.I.A.’s program to hold captured Qaeda members in secret overseas jails and to question them with harsh techniques, which he does not explicitly describe.

Mr. Tenet expresses puzzlement that, since 2001, Al Qaeda has not sent “suicide bombers to cause chaos in a half-dozen American shopping malls on any given day.”

“I do know one thing in my gut,” he writes. “Al Qaeda is here and waiting.”

David E. Sanger contributed reporting from Washington, and Julie Bosman from New York.

Correction: May 1, 2007

A front-page article on Friday about a new book by George J. Tenet, the former director of central intelligence, gave the incorrect name in some copies for the 2004 award bestowed on him by President Bush. It is the Presidential Medal of Freedom, not the Presidential Medal of Honor.

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