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THE REAL STORY OF 'CURVEBALL'

How German Intelligence Helped Justify the US Invasion of Iraq

By Erich Follath, John Goetz, Marcel Rosenbach and Holger Stark

Five years ago, the US government presented what it said was proof that Iraq harbored biological weapons. The information came from a source developed by German intelligence -- and it turned out to be disastrously wrong. But to this day, Germany denies any responsibility.

If you're looking to hide out from the rest of the world, the grayish white residential block in this southern German city would be a good place to be. Six families live here, most of them with children, and the building blends inconspicuously into the dull suburban skyline. A green toy tractor is parked out front, the bicycles have baby trailers, one of them complete with an American flag fluttering in the breeze. On a mailbox hanging outside the building's entrance, the name Rafed has been scrawled in pale green handwriting -- difficult to read, but decipherable from up close. There are many the world over who would love a chance to chat with the man whose mail lands in this post box. The US Congress is desperately interested in him, and the White House once even expressed an interest in trotting him out on primetime television. A book has been written about him and Hollywood is currently working on a motion picture documenting his life. The man's codename is "Curveball." And in an earlier life, he played a crucial role in the geo-politics at the beginning of this decade: He was the man who provided vital "evidence" that ultimately contributed to the invasion of Iraq by the United States and its allies. But that role has since turned into his greatest problem: Everything he claimed to know about Iraq's weapons program, all the proof he presented, was fabricated. His lifeline, though, has yet to be cut: Germany's foreign intelligence agency, the Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND), remains loyal to their source. They keep him under cover and protect him from uncomfortable questions -- here in southern Germany.

Blown Cover

At first, there are no signs of life from "Curveball's" ground-floor dwelling in the drab apartment building. The doorbell has a bad contact, the neighbors said; you have to hold the

button down for a long time. Children's shoes and men's sandals are arrayed in front of the door; a German forest landscape hangs on the wall. And then, after a long wait, the door swings open. A stocky man with a full shock of black hair and a stubbly beard stands in the doorway. He is wearing an orange T-shirt and pajama bottoms. Still groggy from sleep, he blinks out at his unexpected visitor. "Rafed?" -- "Yeah, that's me," he says. It is the moment when Rafed knows his cover has been blown. The source known as "Curveball" lives under BND protection in southern Germany. In baseball, a curveball is pure deception. It spins quickly, and changes direction, making it very difficult for the batter to make contact. A curveball lures the batter to swing at a ball that is no longer there.

Rafed's deceptions unleashed their full power on Feb. 5, 2003 at the United Nations building in New York City. It was the day that US Secretary of State Colin Powell went before the UN Security Council in an effort to convince the world that an invasion of Iraq was an absolute necessity. It was 10:30 a.m. local time, when Powell launched into his lecture, and it immediately became clear that he was playing to an audience larger than the UN representatives gathered before him. He was speaking to the world. "Every statement I make today is backed up by sources, solid sources," he said. "These are not assertions. What we're giving you are facts and conclusions based on solid intelligence." As Powell moved through his 76-minute-long presentation, a horror scenario unfolded. Baghdad, he said, was still in pursuit of weapons of mass destruction, including atomic, chemical and biological devices. That pursuit, Powell made clear, was in violation of UN sanctions. The climax of the lecture came when he told his audience about the mobile biological weapons laboratories -- mini factories mounted on the back of trucks churning out some of the most dangerous diseases known to mankind. That was the "most dramatic" part of the presentation Powell says today. But there was drama right from the beginning. Early on, the Secretary of State held up a small vial containing white powder -- meant to represent anthrax spores. Saddam Hussein, he said, "could have produced 25,000 liters" of the stuff. Saddam Hussein spins a "web of lies" Powell said and spoke of "one last chance" which Iraq had chosen not to take advantage of. The country harbors a "deadly network of terrorism," he said, and as a result, the world "must not shrink from whatever is ahead."

The response to the speech, broadcast as it was to the entire world, was overwhelming. On the following day, the US Secretary of State could be seen with the anthrax vial on the front page of newspapers from Sydney to Sao Paolo, from Paris to Beijing. "We love him," rejoiced the *Jerusalem Post*, hardly a Powell-friendly paper until then. Everyone was suddenly talking about biological weapons -- about the "trailers of death" and "hell on wheels." Above all, however, Powell was able to convince many of his fellow Americans who had harbored doubts about the need to go to war in the Middle East. Following Powell's appearance, surveys revealed that half of all US citizens supported a war on Iraq. And the Secretary of State himself was delighted with his performance. He had small plaques made for everyone who had helped prepare the speech. But those he convinced that winter day in 2003 would come to regret it. As the world came to discover, nothing of what he said was truthful. There were no Iraqi weapons of mass destruction at the time Powell made his presentation. There were no mobile biological weapons laboratories. And there were no connections between Iraq and the terrorist organization al-Qaida.

An 'Invaluable Asset'

The reactions around the UN Security Council table on that day just over five years ago were primarily characterized by diplomatic reserve -- including that of the man who chaired the

fateful session: Joschka Fischer, Germany's foreign minister at the time. The German delegation had set up a secure line from New York directly to the BND intelligence offices in Berlin, where the agents followed Powell's speech on a big screen. Like Powell, who made certain that then-CIA Director George Tenet was visible behind him on the world's TV screens, Fischer had also brought along an important intelligence official. But Hans Dieter H., the BND's proliferation expert, was not seated near the foreign minister. Rather, he was positioned diagonally behind Tenet and Powell. The seating was little more than chance; the UN had to set up several additional rows of chairs to accommodate the large audience. The result, though, was that Germany's intelligence representative was seated together with those who supported the war. As is now clear, the seating was auspicious. The German secret service actually had more to do with providing justification for the US invasion of Iraq than it would now like to admit. Chancellor Gerhard Schröder -- like his colleagues in Paris and Moscow -- was a vehement opponent of the war. But of all people, his own agents provided Washington with the key bit of "evidence" which helped fuel the war hysteria: the story about the mobile biological weapons laboratories. It was information that helped justify a war that has cost more than 500,000 lives and plunged the Middle East into chaos. And this information came from just one man: "Curveball."

He was, as Tenet said then, an "invaluable asset." Today, it is clear that "Curveball" is an imposter, a fabulist, a man who, in the US, is referred to as the "con man who caused the war." "Curveball," writes spy-thriller author Frederick Forsyth, is responsible for the "biggest fiasco in the history of secret intelligence." Germany's BND is the agency responsible for this man. And the most important question surrounding "Curveball" still hasn't been answered to this day. Why does German intelligence remain loyal to its source?

German Intelligence Finds a Source

Rafed was brought up often in high level meetings between intelligence community leaders and the chancellery of Gerhard Schröder to discuss how to handle his information. Both current Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and current BND President Ernst Uhrlau had high level positions under Schröder. The chancellery even coordinated its efforts with the Foreign Ministry under Joschka Fischer and the Ministry of Defense under Peter Struck. Serious doubts were expressed, but nobody pulled the emergency break. But how is such a dramatic intelligence disaster possible? And who should take the political responsibility? Germany's secret service ignominy got its start in the winter of the year 1999, in a camp for asylum seekers known as Zirndorf. The man from the Sunni heartland of Iraq was 32 years old when he arrived in the barracks just outside of the Bavarian city of Nuremberg. The pale, low-slung buildings surrounded by barbed wire were hardly how he had envisioned freedom. Anyone who wanted to leave the premises for a visit to Nuremberg needed written permission; the camp was designed to protect the persecuted, but its resemblance to a prison was difficult to ignore. Anyone who landed here wanted just one thing -- to get out again as quickly as possible. Among the numerous Iraqis in the camp, the rumor was making the rounds that one easy way out was via the branch office of the German secret service located just outside the Zirndorf gates. The agents there routinely questioned asylum seekers from Iraq.

An Ambitious Doctor

When Rafed walked into the interrogation office, the agent in charge wasn't alone. Rather, he was joined by an experienced Arabic interpreter, a man in his mid-sixties with gray hair who

has already put in decades working at Zirndorf. The two were not interested in the stories of suffering the asylum seekers had to tell. They were looking for information about Saddam's ruling clique, his military and, above all, his alleged weapons of mass destruction. In Arabic, Rafed told the agents about his chemical engineering studies at Baghdad Technical University, and about his first job in the so-called "Military Industrialization Commission" -- that part of Saddam's regime responsible for the development of new weapons systems. The translator and the BND agent pricked up their ears, but soon they were no longer able to follow. Rafed began speaking about his work in the "Chemical Engineering and Design Center" (CEDC) -- and he spoke about bioreactors.

But if the agents in Zirndorf lacked the specialist knowledge necessary to understand what Rafed was telling them, when his dossier landed on an expert's desk at intelligence headquarters in Pullach, located not far from Munich, the agent there immediately knew he had something. He was a wiry man in his forties who had gone prematurely gray, not at all the secret agent cliché. When it came to Rafed's case, he was simply referred to as the "Doctor." Colleagues describe the "Doctor" as open and pleasant, but also as "very ambitious." His nickname came from his having earned a doctorate in biology, and by the time Rafed's story appeared in his in-box, the analyst had been with German intelligence for more than 12 years. Nobody at the BND was better acquainted with the abbreviation CEDC - - the key front for Saddam's secret weapons program -- than the "Doctor." Indeed, he was apparently so excited after reading Rafed's dossier that he wanted to meet the Iraqi asylum seeker personally. Not long after, the two got together for their first tete á tete at a secret BND property in Nuremberg known as the "Burgzinne" -- the battlements.

Protective Metal Coffins

Participants to those meetings recall that it was not long before the general impression emerged that the young Iraqi knew quite a lot. "He appeared to be shy, almost timid. He was not at all the typical boastful type that we often experience," said one person who became acquainted with Rafed during this period. International politics were never far from the agents' minds as they continued interviewing Rafed. Secret service agencies across the Western world were working on the biggest intelligence challenge of the day: the question as to whether Saddam Hussein still maintained an arsenal of monstrous weapons. Anyone able to provide an answer could expect to rapidly climb the career ladder. Rafed was able to provide the "Doctor" with a plausible explanation as to why UN inspectors had failed to find anything thus far: The biological weapons program, he said, was mobile. The laboratories, he claimed, were mounted on truck trailers so they could be easily hidden from inspectors. One of these mini germ factories was up and running when he left Iraq, Rafed said, and six others were being built. Another detail sounded particularly alarming: He said he knew of a 1998 accident that resulted in 12 casualties. The contaminated corpses, he said, were buried in protective metal coffins. It wasn't long before Rafed's claims rose up the chain of command - - onto the desk of the BND president, inside the German Foreign Ministry, into the chancellery, and even across the Atlantic to the White House. The interest in such information had been high throughout the decade. Since 1991, the UN had been attempting to find out whether Saddam still hoarded weapons of mass destruction, and for years a special UN commission, consisting of hundreds of experts, had been scouring Iraq for deadly weapons.

Amorous Adventures

One year before “Curveball” appeared on the scene, Saddam threw the inspectors out of the country. But did he really destroy all of his weapons? That was the claim made by Hussein Kamil Hassan, Saddam's son-in-law who had defected to Jordan in 1995. The BND also interviewed Kamil, and was told that there was "nothing, absolutely nothing left at all." But the agents in Germany refused to believe a single word of Kamil's account. The "Doctor" was particularly skeptical. Indeed he was well known in the BND for his conviction that Saddam was still producing weapons of mass destruction. “Curveball” was, for the “Doctor,” flesh and blood validation for his deep-seated doubts. Rafed could not only map out every single office in the secret fifth floor of the Baghdad CEDC Center and say who worked in them, but he even chatted away about the amorous adventures of his superiors. In the secret service business, refugees are generally not considered to be the most reliable of sources. They often overstate things because of bitterness harbored toward the countries they left or to try and inflate their own importance. But Rafed remained perennially calm and reserved -- which is precisely why he was believed. The BND, so they thought, had stumbled across a real blue-chip source. And Rafed delivered detail after detail. The meetings were usually held on Saturdays, in the relaxed atmosphere of various dwellings belonging to German intelligence. On one occasion, Rafed stood up, walked over to the wall and flipped over a pin-up calendar. The naked women seemed to bother him. Although he could not have been described as a strict believer, he identified himself as a Muslim. He didn't, though, take time out for prayer during the interminable interrogations. Nevertheless, he was careful to avoid eating pork at the regular joint dinners. Eventually, by the beginning of the year 2003, the BND had prepared some 100 top secret reports on these meetings and send them to Washington. The British, the French and the Israelis were also kept in the loop. Intelligence experts and UN inspectors had long considered mobile weapons laboratories to be a possible explanation for the fact that nothing could be found. It was once claimed that the stuff was hidden in the trucks of an ice cream company. On another occasion, American U2-spy planes flew special missions in search of mobile laboratories -- with no success. The UN inspectors were so taken with the idea that they seriously considered erecting surprise road blocks -- and even wanted to use helicopters to spray special foam on the roads to force suspicious trucks to stop.

Still, soon after the initial enthusiasm for "Curveball," the first doubts began to surface. US intelligence aimed a spy satellite at one of the filling stations that Rafed had described in great detail. On the crystal clear photos, a solid wall could be seen where, according to Rafed's account, the entrance to the compound should have been. But both the Americans and the Germans wanted to believe their new source and pushed their doubts aside. The wall, surely, was only a fake. Rafed was allowed to leave the Zirndorf camp for good after just a three week stay, and two months later he had his own apartment in Erlangen. He was granted political asylum soon thereafter. His Iraqi acquaintances who visited him from Zirndorf were envious. Rafed now wore suits. There was whiskey in the cupboard, and a television and stereo system in the living room. The BND arranged for more than 50 meetings, after which it seemed there wasn't a detail Rafed hadn't already mentioned. The “Doctor” met with him for the last time in the summer of 2001.

Then came September 11.

Justification for the American War

It was only a few days after the attacks in New York and Washington that the White House made the preliminary decision to go to war – and the focus was not just to be on Afghanistan.

President Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney, one of the administration's hawks, also wanted to go after Iraq. But for that to come to pass, a doubting global community would have to be convinced that it was necessary. Saddam must be made to appear as dangerous as possible. This marked the beginning of Rafed's second career -- "Curveball" and the warmongers in Washington were a perfect match. The result of their collaboration was like a Hollywood film script, with the climax coming in the form of a dramatic appearance before the UN performed by lead actor Colin Powell. The first draft of the Powell presentation was produced by the neoconservatives Cheney had surrounded himself with. The section on weapons of mass destruction -- closely written sheets oozing with accusations -- took up a total of 48 pages. Powell's closest advisors, including his chief of staff Lawrence Wilkerson, moved into CIA headquarters in Langley for several days and nights. It didn't take long, however, before the Cheney draft was tossed into the trash can.

An official intelligence assessment from October 2002 became the basis for the new draft. That assessment was the product of a White House order and saw US intelligence scraping together any charges against Saddam's regime they could find. But apart from an airy story about alleged nuclear weapons research and purported connections between the government and al-Qaida, only the material from Germany remained.

The 'Crown Jewel'

"Curveball" was suddenly the man of the hour -- more than a year after Germany's BND had deactivated him as a source. Rafed, the biological weapons snitch who had come from Iraq to southern Germany suddenly became the "crown jewel," says Wilkerson today. "The file was so thick that the whole story just couldn't be wrong." President Bush was likewise triumphant in the knowledge that he now had a key witness against Saddam. The president knew the story of "Curveball" from his CIA head George Tenet. Tenet's job involved briefing the White House every day on intelligence developments in addition to a personal meeting with Powell. The mobile biological laboratories, Tenet insisted, represented iron clad information. There was just one hitch: The material came from a country which, together with France and Russia, formed the core of war opposition. More than 80 percent of the German population opposed a military campaign against Baghdad. Heading up the skeptics was German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who had won re-election in 2002 on the strength of his anti-war rhetoric. On the other side of the aisle was then-opposition leader Angela Merkel. She insisted that the option "to use military means as a last resort" had to be kept open.

August Hanning -- then BND president and today a deputy in the Interior Ministry -- had already committed himself in public on one point. On Nov. 7, 2002 he asserted that German intelligence had "no independent information" indicating that Saddam Hussein had provided support to al-Qaida. Even the constantly repeated warning from the US government that Saddam was attempting to acquire nuclear weapons fell on deaf ears in the BND. On that point, Germany's intelligence community could hardly be counted among the warmongers.

'In a Position to Prove All of This'

What the BND did believe, however, was discussed behind closed doors at 8:30 a.m. on a foggy Wednesday morning. It was Nov. 13, 2002 and the German parliament's foreign affairs committee met in room 2.800 on the second floor of the Paul-Löbe-Haus, a building in Berlin's new government quarter. Not even a refreshment cart was allowed in for the top

secret meeting that morning. BND President Hanning opened the proceedings, speaking in a calm voice with his hands folded in front of him. Initially, he spoke in generalities about Saddam's aspirations to obtain weapons of mass destruction and said there were indications that Iraq was hiding biological and chemical weapons that had proven difficult for the inspectors to locate. He then turned the proceedings over to his specialist, Hans Dieter H. H., a small, stout man with wavy, gray hair, enjoyed great respect among experts for his cool and incisive analysis. "Iraq has purportedly manufactured seven mobile B-weapons systems," H. told the committee. He had brought along an overhead slide, a simple drawing of the alleged mobile laboratories -- a preliminary taste of what Powell would later present to the Security Council. This information, H. said, is based on a "secret source," but one whose claims have not been verified.

With that, the foreign affairs committee was made aware of the testimony from "Curveball." But while H. was, on the one hand, unambiguous, he was also cautious. "We know nothing about production in these facilities," he added. The expert also reported on Iraq's alleged nuclear weapons program and on Scud missiles that would be operational within two to three years. The report ended with a memorable sentence: "We are in a position to prove all of this." Volker R  he, the chairman of the committee from the conservative Christian Democrats, then remarked on the "enormous discrepancy between the public statements made by the government and the knowledge it had in its possession." An astonished Guido Westerwelle, head of the business-friendly Free Democratic Party (FDP) commented that "the actual threat looks different" from what had been publicly stated. Both Hanning and H. were themselves clearly convinced of the danger. In a highly publicized move, the German government had procured €60 million worth of smallpox vaccine as early as the autumn of 2001 -- one of the responses to the testimony provided by "Curveball."

No Television Appearance for 'Curveball'

To this day, the German government maintains secrecy with regard to what was discussed in room 2.800. There are not even official minutes from the meeting. But on the basis of tape recordings, the BND later reconstructed what Hanning and H. said in order to be able to deflect any possible criticism. Not long after the Berlin meeting, Tenet came to his German colleagues with a request that was as unusual as it was delicate. The CIA head politely asked Hanning whether he thought there was any possibility that "Curveball" could appear on American television for Bush's annual State of the Union address. Barring that, the US wanted to finally have an opportunity to question "Curveball" itself. In addition, Tenet wanted German permission to make public use of BND information -- a quasi admission that the US thought the information was accurate. Tenet's role had transformed into that of a public prosecutor in search of witnesses willing to go public -- far from the traditional task of a secret service professional obsessed with protecting his sources. He even gave the Germans a deadline: He needed an answer within 48 hours, he said.

The BND was alarmed. It was immediately clear to Hanning that the issue had become highly political -- and that it was up to the chancellor to make a decision on what to do. The plenary hall in the Bundestag was largely empty during a Friday session just before Christmas 2002, with many parliamentarians having already headed home for the holidays. And it was about to become emptier. In the middle of the session, Chancellor Schr  der suddenly summoned Defense Minister Struck, chancellery chief of staff Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer to his office. Ernst Uhrlau, secret service coordinator, was already there. Of the so-called "security cabinet," only Interior Minister Otto Schily couldn't make it.

The meeting that morning in Schröder's office lasted for an hour and the government's general position on the impending war in Iraq was discussed. The main topic, though, was "Curveball" and how Berlin should respond to the US request. Rafed's core allegations against Saddam's regime were once again recapitulated, but so too were his story's weaknesses. Of particular concern, the decisive criteria for reliable intelligence was far from being fulfilled: Instead of three independent sources, they only had one. A television appearance? Under no circumstances. Questioning by the CIA? Best avoided.

Germany Compromises on 'Curveball'

The government officials, though, were united in their fear that a categorical refusal of the US request would be seen as an affront. After all, German-American relations had already been shaken by Schröder's anti-war stance during his 2002 re-election campaign. Furthermore, the chancellor and his foreign minister feared what would happen if it turned out that Saddam really did have weapons of mass destruction. Germany would be a sitting duck for accusations that it had concealed its knowledge for political reasons. Should American soldiers lose their lives as a result, Fischer feared, it would be a diplomatic and public relations disaster. Thus, Schröder's cabinet opted for a compromise. The government decided to send special armored reconnaissance vehicles capable of detecting chemical and biological agents to Kuwait and to grant the US military flyover rights during the war. They also extended the times during which American soldiers could engage in target practice on bases in Germany -- so that the US troops could be as prepared as possible for the war. One of those present later put the diplomatic balancing act into a nutshell: "We were against the war, but we wanted to be good allies." As far as "Curveball" was concerned, the government wanted to give Washington permission to use Rafed's statements but, at the same time insisted on a few qualifications. "We didn't trust the Americans," said one meeting participant. "But we didn't want to withhold any information."

Carte Blanche

Hanning was charged with transforming the compromise agreement into an official reply to the Americans. And the head of German intelligence carefully considered each and every word that went into his Dec. 20, 2002 letter. The BND, Hanning wrote, had consulted with the CIA, the Israelis and the British "in order to evaluate the indications made by our source with regard to mobile facilities for the production of warfare agents." According to Hanning, "the information was in essence judged as plausible and convincing, but it couldn't be confirmed." For this reason the BND wanted to approach the UN inspectors once again "in order to enable immediate on-site clarification." If Tenet should nevertheless "be inclined to use the reports and the results of the joint appraisal on mobile biological warfare facilities in Iraq publicly, then I would allow this procedure in the expectation that protection of our source, which makes our work possible, be guaranteed." Translated from the bureaucratese, the message was: Do whatever you want, but it's your responsibility. Even today, that letter remains exhibit "A" for then BND and German government leaders when it comes to discussions about Germany's responsibility for the pre-Iraq intelligence debacle. Gunter Pleuger, for example, Germany's UN Ambassador at the time, says: "For me it was a perfectly clear warning, and I assumed that the information provided by 'Curveball' would no longer be used by the Americans."

Today, though, the BND apparently no longer sees the letter as an adequate exculpation. The secret service now points to a Washington meeting in the autumn of 2002, shortly before

Hanning's letter, whereby the then-BND agent in Washington met with Tyler Drumheller, CIA operations leader for Europe, for a lunch meeting in a restaurant called Sea Catch. Drumheller recalls that the BND agent warned that "Curveball" was psychologically unstable and likely a fraud. The BND has now, for the first time, officially confirmed this account. According to Tenet, the CIA even specifically asked the BND contact what he thought of "Curveball" after the war began. In response, though, the BND agent didn't specifically call "Curveball" a "fabricator," Tenet says. Rather, he spoke of a "single source" whose information couldn't be independently confirmed -- the same watered-down formulation that found its way into the Hanning letter. Former highly-placed BND agents confirm this account. In any case, the CIA and the White House interpreted Hanning's response as *carte blanche*. Five weeks after receiving Hanning's letter, the US president announced in his State of the Union address that Saddam possessed "several mobile biological weapons labs" and further that "he has given no evidence that he has destroyed them." But as confident as President Bush seemed, the US intelligence community was divided into two camps. The majority followed the war drums of the hawks. But there were also critics who warned against going to war. The CIA's Drumheller was one of them, and he mentioned his reservations to John McLaughlin, second in command at the CIA. On the night before Powell's Security Council presentation, he even telephoned with George Tenet himself. "Hey, boss," he recalls saying. "Be careful with that German report. It's supposed to be taken out. There are a lot of problems with that."

Six-Thousand Kilometers Away

Tenet would later deny that Drumheller's warning took this form. He also later claimed that the explosive letter, which he had requested from Hanning, reached the CIA but never landed on his desk. In any case, the Drumheller initiative, if it happened at all, bore no fruit. The allegations leveled by "Curveball" made it into Powell's Feb. 5, 2003 appearance. Six-thousand kilometers away, a man was sitting in front of his television watching Powell's presentation and knowing full well what was going on in New York -- "Curveball" himself. He quickly packed his things and tried to disappear. He was horrified, and knew that there was no turning back from what he had set in motion. It took a lot of effort on the part of the BND to calm him down again. One week after Powell's presentation, BND head Hanning once again made an appearance before the German parliament's foreign affairs committee, and the gathered parliamentarians wanted to know what to think about the evidence presented by the US Secretary of State. Powell confirmed "his own assessment of the situation up to now," replied Hanning. "We knew about the locations which he specified." Hanning warned against war, and he reminded his audience that there were indications "but no proof." However, the BND assumes that Iraq has both "B and C weapons," both residual quantities and newly produced material, Hanning continued. He did nothing to dissociate himself from Powell. H., who was present once again, didn't either. On the contrary. "Even more worrisome are indications about mobile biological weapons labs," H. remarked, "which at any time could secretly produce reagents for B weapons such as anthrax and botulinus and can quickly be relocated."

The BND, evidently, still believed in its source.

The UN weapons inspectors in Iraq remained skeptical and the Russian government also expressed doubt immediately following Powell's appearance. Shortly after 9:00 a.m. on Feb. 8, 2003 -- just three days after Powell's presentation -- a column of white jeeps headed out from the UN Disarmament Commission headquarters in Baghdad's Canal Hotel. The

biological weapons experts working for chief inspector Hans Blix had been charged with finding the mobile laboratories mentioned by "Curveball." Blix had already seen them at least once -- on paper. "The BND showed me and my staff impressive sketches and diagrams about Iraqi biological weapons," said Blix.

The inspectors were on their way to Djerf al Naddaf, the place that Rafed had described to German agents over and over again. Rocco Casagrande, a young American scientist, was also along for the ride. Casagrande roamed through the abandoned buildings in the small town for hours, collecting minute samples. More than anything, though, he wanted to find the opening in the wall described by "Curveball," through which the trucks entered and left. After three and a half hours of searching, Casagrande decided enough was enough. The story was completely wrong, he recalls thinking.

The Fruitless Hunt for WMDs in Iraq

The bombardment of Iraq began on March 19, 2003 at 5:36 a.m. local time, and the government quarter in Baghdad was soon engulfed in flames. Just weeks later, the regime disintegrated and, at Firdos Square in Baghdad, a statue of Saddam was pulled from its pedestal in front of gathered television reporters. On May 1, a triumphant US President Bush, decked out in a pilot's jacket and sunglasses, appeared on the deck of an aircraft carrier with the infamous "Mission Accomplished" banner hanging behind him. Not long later, US Special Forces began looking for weapons of mass destruction. The 1,400-strong group responsible for that search -- which later came to be known as the Iraq Survey Group -- took its marching orders from the CIA. And its mission was clear. They were to seek out, defuse and the present Iraqi weapons of mass destruction to the world with the greatest publicity possible. The Bush administration didn't just want to win the war -- it wanted to prove that the invasion had been justified. The experts, though, found nothing.

If there was one man who wanted to believe "Curveball" at this time, then it was David Kay. The Texan was a contentious figure -- not known for shying away from conflict -- and had been in Iraq at the beginning of the 1990s as a UN weapons inspector. He fervently believed that Saddam had retained his weapons of mass destruction, convinced that the dictator would never have surrendered this horrific trump card.

A Jubilant President

When the search for Saddam's alleged weapons got underway, Kay was working as an expert for the American TV network NBC and he was allowed by the military to see one of two suspicious trucks which, the Americans hoped, might have played a role in the production of biological weapons. Kay stepped in front of the camera and said that, other than producing weapons, "there is nothing else you would do" with the mobile units. For a moment it appeared as though the White House had won the propaganda battle. Bush was jubilant. "You remember when Colin Powell stood up in front of the world," he asked in a television interview, before boasting: "Iraq has got ... mobile labs to build biological weapons.... We've so far discovered two." Powell was likewise relieved, and claimed that the trucks had been found. The Germans also saw the apparent evidence as vindication of their efforts and of their source. The BND showed "Curveball" photos of the trucks. He claimed to recognize elements of the contraption.

Kay's TV appearance made such an impression at the White House that the former weapons inspector was soon asked to become the head of the Iraq Survey Group and he was charged with seeking out Saddam's remaining arsenal. The Texan agreed, and was granted extraordinary powers. He was given a salary equivalent to that of a four-star general, was allowed to hand out coveted Green Cards to Iraqi informants, and was granted a secret budget of \$10 million to pay off those willing to snitch. Before Kay got going, he studied all of the relevant documents, including those from Germany. When he saw that the entire biological weapons claim was based on just one source, he gave it top priority. Two of his staff members were tasked with fining Rafed's family. His family lived in a white single family home in Baghdad, and Rafed's mother and older brother were at home when the Americans came calling. It was the first time that the life story "Curveball" had presented to his German handlers was looked into.

Lies and Half-Truths

Rafed had said that he was first in his class. His mother, though, told Kay's inspectors a slightly different story. She said that her son had been a good pupil, but that he had run into some difficulties. Indeed, she reported, he had barely managed to finish school with a "D" average -- just 60 out of 100 possible points. Rafed's best subject, in which he received 76 points, had remarkably little to do with his subsequent major of engineering: "Culture and the History of Iraq." And so the story continued. No matter what the inspectors asked about, they stumbled across a mixture of lies and half-truths told by Rafed. He hated America, Rafed had told a German intelligence agent. But posters of American pop groups hung in his room, which his mother had left undisturbed. Indeed, she explained, Rafed had wanted to emigrate to the US. One of the central premises in the story Rafed told German intelligence officials was that he had worked in Saddam's weapons program until 1998 -- the only way he could have learned about the alleged deadly accident which supposedly took place that year. Kay recalled that on this point, Rafed's mother was almost embarrassed. To her knowledge, she said, her son Rafed had worked for the CEDC only until 1995. Even worse, his relatives told Kay that Rafed was no longer even in Iraq in 1998. With the help of the family, Kay's men -- including a CIA operative of many years named "Jerry," who had constantly defended "Curveball's" reliability -- now began a frantic search for old friends and superiors, for men such as Basil Latif and Hilal Freah. Freah, 42, is a tall, heavysset man with a gray beard and penetrating eyes. It is a mild day at the beginning of December 2007 and Freah is sitting in the cigar lounge of Regency Palace Hotel in the Jordanian capital Amman. He wants nothing to eat and he orders nothing to drink. Five years after the start of the war, Hilal Freah only wants to talk. He knew the man who became "Curveball" better than almost anyone else. "Rafed, of all people," he groans. "Everyone who knows him knows that he is a born fraud."

The Incident with the Lambs

Freah was his immediate superior at CEDC, Saddam's research center in Baghdad. But more than that, he was also something of a foster parent to Rafed. He knew Rafed's family well -- that his older brother once served with Saddam's Republican Guard and that the younger one ran a corner shop in Baghdad. One sister was an employee at the national railway administration, and the other studied psychology. Rafed even went to Freah's wedding -- and a few weeks later Freah attended Rafed's as well, when he married another young CEDC employee in a lavish celebration in a Baghdad officers club. Although his English was mediocre, and his knowledge of chemistry and biology average at best, Rafed made a modest career for himself. As a result of his "communications skills" he was employed twice by

Freah as an on-site project manager: first at an oil refinery, where Rafed supervised the building of 11 cooling towers. And then in Djerf al-Nadaf, a project focusing on the development of seeds -- which later became ground zero for the mobile biological weapons labs in Rafed's narrations. For the Djerf project, he was even chauffeured the 40 kilometers from Baghdad, past date plantations and over the Tigris River. Once at work Rafed sat in an office container, bent over sketches and drawings. But, remembers Freah, "he always came late." That, though, wasn't the half of it. The first real trouble started when Freah noticed that Rafed was cheating with the invoices of a local company in Djerf. He tried to do the same with other equipment necessary for the project. And then there was the incident with the lambs. It was the grand opening of the seed factory, and Basil Latif, the head of CEDC and even Hussein Kamil, Saddam's son-in-law, were there to cut the red ribbon. To celebrate the occasion Rafed purchased three lambs from a neighboring farmer, allegedly for 30,000 dinar apiece. By chance, a colleague spoke with the farmer not long later and complained about the high price. But, the farmer protested, he had received just 20,000 dinar per sheep. Rafed had apparently pocketed the difference. "That is why I fired him in 1995," Hilal Freah explains.

Freah, though, decided to give Rafed a second chance in private industry. With a friend of Rafed's they founded a cosmetics company named "Ranh." Rafed was supposed to procure shampoo bottles -- and he cheated again with the same trick. This time Freah broke off all contact. In Iraq he had been a member of the Baath Party and Rafed's behavior severely incriminated him. Even worse, after the Iraq invasion, teams of CIA agents appeared in front of Freah's apartment and dragged him off in handcuffs for interrogation.

Only One Winner

What would he say to Rafed today? "I'd like to kill him twice for what he did to the Iraqi people," Freah answers coldly. Freah's report is confirmed by Basil Latif, general manager of CEDC at the time, who lives today as a wealthy businessman in Oman. "Rafed was a nice guy," he says, "but he was not a particularly good engineer and even back then he was a dishonest man who deceived us several times." Kay and his team of inspectors heard such stories whenever they asked about Rafed in Baghdad and its surroundings. It was a perfect disaster. Kay first sent warning messages to Washington and then flew to CIA headquarters to deliver the bad news himself. "We were all wrong," was the message he had to deliver.

In Berlin, a parliamentary committee of inquiry is currently looking into the question as to whether German intelligence engaged in inadmissible cooperation with the Americans in the fight against terror. The questions have to do with the US prison at Guantanamo, with torture and with illegal interrogations. It does not, however, concern one of the biggest debacles in the history of the German secret service. The case of "Curveball" has not been re-examined and the political responsibility remains unclear.

'Fundamental Considerations'

Even today, the BND has yet to admit to its own mistakes. The agency, now under the leadership of then-secret service coordinator Ernst Uhrlau, is unwilling to even answer questions about the case -- due to "fundamental considerations," as the service dryly informed SPIEGEL in response to a request. There is an unspoken rule in the world of intelligence: The more important a case and the greater the possible consequences, the more reliable the source should be. In the case of "Curveball," the rule was flip-flopped. The statements made by Rafed were considered plausible precisely because they were so difficult to check. Global

policy was shaped using the story "Curveball" told. The analysis of his statements was totally bush league. German intelligence did not, as is common practice, assign one agent to interview "Curveball" and a separate agent to evaluate and analyze what "Curveball" was telling them. The BND placed both duties into the hands of the "Doctor," precisely because the source was so difficult. Above all, however, the spymasters failed to do what is indispensable in the intelligence business: They did not sufficiently examine "Curveball's" personal record. Perhaps they could have learned early on that, for a time, Rafed tried to make a go of manufacturing eye shadow. Later he stole 1.5 million dinar-worth of gear from the partially state-owned film and television company Babel TV, where he was responsible for equipment maintenance. A warrant for his arrest had been issued as a result -- the real reason why he bolted from Iraq in 1998. The BND would not even have had to go to Iraq to learn about Rafed's real character -- he remained true to form in Germany as well. Despite an explicit ban by BND authorities, Rafed worked for a time in a Chinese restaurant, and even behind the counter at a Burger King restaurant. He quickly attracted attention to himself. Several Iraqis described him to SPIEGEL as a "crackpot" and "con man." Still, the intelligence service believed in its source to the very end. The British secret service had expressed its doubts openly as early as 2001, after an expert from MI6 used a pretext to arrange a meeting with "Curveball." He came to the conclusion that elements of "Curveball's" behavior "strike us as typical of fabricators."

'Dishonest, Unprofessional and Irresponsible'

An American physician from the US Defense Department, who had briefly come into contact with Rafed in the course of an investigation in 2000, sent e-mails for years warning as many as he could within the US intelligence community. "Curveball" had a strong smell of alcohol on his breath, he said, and his BND agent seemed to "have fallen in love" with his informant. In March 2004, the CIA was finally, over a period of two days, able to question "Curveball" directly. The Americans were horrified, and they quickly became convinced that the Iraqi invented the whole story. In June, Rafed was officially classified in the US as a "fabricator." David Kay, the American specialist assigned with searching for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, is harshly critical of German intelligence. He says it is shocking that the BND did not "make all the appropriate efforts to validate the source," and that, by its refusal to let "Curveball" be interrogated by the CIA, German intelligence also prevented others from seeing him for what he was. "That was dishonest, unprofessional and irresponsible," he says.

Colin Powell's chief of staff Wilkerson also feels that the Germans "share in the responsibility." He says "they did not just send their information about Curveball as a chance operation. It was carefully considered what they sent to us, each and every word was weighed very carefully." He adds: "I can't exclude the Germans completely here from their share of guilt."

But the BND still takes a different view. "If the US government builds its house on shifting sands, we are not to blame," says a high-ranking German intelligence official. "We simply passed on information, no evaluations." And: "The US bears responsibility for what happened at the Security Council." In the end it is a story that only has losers.

Today, Colin Powell, Bush's retired secretary of state, calls his Security Council presentation the worst moment of his career. He left government service long ago and has worked since July 2007 as a partner in a venture capital company. Powell's chief of staff Wilkerson also

speaks of the “lowest point of my professional life.” Today he teaches at George Washington University in Washington D.C.

'I Am Not to Blame'

The “Doctor” left the BND and is now self-employed. David Kay earns his money as a consultant. Hans Blix is working again for the Swedish government. He thinks he has an explanation for the dynamics that fed the disaster. “Intelligence services know that they will be punished if they fail to come up with something,” he says. “They are not punished if they overdo things. Therefore they are inclined to exaggerate.” In 2004, George Tenet tendered his resignation from the CIA -- only days after “Curveball” was officially branded as a fraud - - and is now in retirement. “We allowed flawed information to be presented to Congress, the President and the whole world,” Tenet wrote in his memoirs. “That never should have happened.”

Saddam Hussein was hanged. More than a year before the noose was placed around his neck, an American government report came to the conclusion that Iraq had destroyed all of its biological pathogens directly after the Gulf War in 1991 and ceased development of the disputed program. Saddam’s refusal to admit that he no longer had any more weapons of mass destruction came out of a fear of Iran. Only one person can feel like a winner: “Curveball.” In September 2007, the German authorities agreed in principle to his naturalization. And “Curveball” remains protected by the BND to this day. In the US, such fabricators are dishonorably dismissed, they don’t get a single penny and every government agency is warned about them. In Germany things are dealt with differently. In all, “Curveball” is said to have been paid hundreds of thousands of euros. And the BND may now have to cough up once again. The intelligence service is considering giving “Curveball” yet another new identity, as well as one for his second wife from Morocco and for his son, who was born in Erlangen. Rafed does not want to say anything about the accusations leveled against him while standing on the street in front of his house, saying he is afraid. But a few days later he opens up on the telephone. After eight years in Germany his German is fairly good and he laughs a lot during the conversation.

“I am not to blame,” says Rafed. “I never said that Iraq had weapons for mass destruction. Not at all. Not in my entire life.” Rafed says the Americans, “know precisely that it is all untrue.” He will tell his story again, but not in Germany, where he was “treated poorly.” For the kind of information that he supplied, he says, he should be “living like a king.” And then Rafed wants to hear an offer. A new offer for his story. He wants to sell it -- again. The American commission that was supposed to evaluate the job done by the intelligence community leading up to the war wrote a tellingly incisive sentence in its final report: “Worse than having no human sources is being seduced by a human source who is telling lies.”

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