

U.S. intel: Iran halted bomb program in '03

IRAN FROM A1

Sarkozy, said, "We talked about Iran and the desire to work jointly to convince the Iranian regime to give up their nuclear-weapons ambitions, for the sake of peace."

More ominously, Bush said at a news conference Oct. 17, "I've told people that if you're interested in avoiding World War III, it seems like you ought to be interested in preventing them from having the knowledge necessary to make a nuclear weapon."

Asked then whether he definitely believed Iran wanted to build a nuclear bomb, Bush said, "Yeah, I believe they want to have the capacity, the knowledge, in order to make a nuclear weapon."

Bush's National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley said the president made comments such as those "because he was describing the threat as the intelligence community itself had been describing the threat both publicly and in their briefings to him."

Echoes of Iraq

Intelligence officials advised Bush several months ago that they were re-evaluating their assessments about Iran.

They came to the White House last Wednesday and briefed him on their new findings.

The intelligence flip-flop recalled the embarrassing reversal that Bush was forced to make on whether Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. The conviction that Saddam Hussein had such weapons was one of the factors behind Bush's decision to invade Iraq. It since has been determined that Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction.

Democrats on Monday did not hesitate to suggest an Iran-Iraq comparison.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid said Democrats had requested the new Iran assessment "so that the administration could not rush this Congress and the country to another war based on flawed intelligence."

"I hope this administration reads this report carefully and appropriately adjusts its rhetoric and policy vis-a-vis Iran," Reid said. "The administration should begin this process by finally undertaking a diplomatic surge necessary to effectively address the challenges posed by Iran."

In the case of Iran, though, the White House has not dropped its suspicions that

Tehran could pursue a nuclear bomb.

Iran continues to develop, test and deploy ballistic missiles, and its civilian uranium-enrichment program is continuing.

"It can readily use the same technology to produce weapons-grade uranium," Hadley said.

In rewriting the conclusions about Iran, the new National Intelligence Estimate said Tehran was pursuing a nuclear-weapons program but halted that effort in the fall of 2003 under the weight of international pressure. Importantly, the estimate said Iran has not restarted the nuclear-bomb program.

"Tehran's decision to halt its nuclear weapons program suggests it is less determined to develop nuclear weapons than we have been judging since 2005," the new estimate said.

White House firm

Though key facts have changed, the administration's strategy has not.

The White House says it will continue to try to build pressure on Iran to prevent it from ever acquiring nuclear bombs.

"The bottom line is that for that strategy to succeed, the international community has to turn up the pressure on Iran with diplomatic isolation, United Nations sanctions and with other financial pressure," Hadley said. "And Iran has to decide that it wants to negotiate a solution."

Some analysts think the new conclusions will be a roadblock for Vice President Dick Cheney and other hawkish members of the administration to be more confrontational toward Iran.

"It's a good thing that we caught this before we marched headlong into another military conflict," said Jon Wolfsthal, senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. "This isn't the time bomb the administration made it out to be for the last several years."

Wolfsthal said the conclusion that international pressure prompted Iran to halt its program "is the piece of information that we missed in Iraq" where Bush believed Iraq's pursuit of WMD was continuing despite sanctions.

Wolfsthal said the administration did not appear inclined to change its strategy toward Iran. He said that "suggests they can't take yes for an answer."

Woman wins historic verdict against Equifax

CREDIT FROM A1

credit history."

The verdict was a big vote of confidence for people who wrestle with a flawed credit-reporting system and take on big corporations that refuse to acknowledge mistakes, said Steven Fahlgren, a Florida-based consumer lawyer who represents Williams.

"We've fought this battle for years, and, despite all the evidence, Equifax denied almost until the end that there were any mistakes in my client's credit file," he said. "But I'm so proud that the jury saw the evidence for what it was. This is a great victory for consumers."

At trial, her lawyers — including co-counsel Robert Sola of Portland, Ore. — showed how Equifax repeatedly confused Williams with someone who had a similar name but whose credit file was rife with bad debt.

Though Williams disputed and debunked the errors numerous times, Equifax kept passing along the false information, ruining her credit, she testified. After eight years of trying to resolve the issue, she sued the company in 2003. Two earlier defendants — Experian and American Recovery Systems — settled the case out of court.

In the meantime, Williams, 37, who works for Orlando Foot & Ankle Clinic,

This has been a nightmare. It's not so much about the money, but about the punishment. I know I'm not the only one that has gone through this. But people need to know their rights. They need to check their credit report and try to be in charge of their credit history."

— ANGELA P. WILLIAMS
PLAINTIFF

from the Jacksonville area, was denied student loans, credit-card accounts, ATM cards and other financial applications, she said. She also couldn't apply for a mortgage, fearing more recurrence of the credit problems.

"When this all began [in 1994], I didn't realize it would be years until things got straightened out," she said. "But now I still don't have the confidence to go and apply for credit. I'm scared of the denials. And I'm a little leery of the credit-reporting agencies. I don't trust them."

There has been a spate of consumer cases against the largest credit-report-

ing operations in recent years, resulting in hundreds of thousands of dollars in judgments, said Evan Hendricks, publisher of *Privacy Times*, a newsletter that tracks such issues.

Too often, people have been victimized by the companies' streamlined, automated process of "investigating" alleged credit-file errors, he said. The process is set up to save money and boost profits rather than protect consumers, said Hendricks, an author who testified in the Williams case.

"If the Williams judgment gets reduced — as many of them do on appeal — it could be seen by the company as just a cost of doing business and no real reason to change," he said. "But if it is upheld, it is a robust notice that what they were doing isn't good enough. And finally after all these years, they may agree to some common sense changes to avoid this sort of thing."

As for Williams, she's just not convinced it is all over.

"I'm not sure this will bring resolution," she said. "I don't have a lot of confidence especially in Equifax, after so many years of having problems. I'm just not confident that I won't have to go through this again."

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