

CIA Statement: Hardly “The Way of the World”

In his book, “The Way of the World,” author Ron Suskind makes some serious charges about the CIA and Iraq. As Agency officers current and former have made clear, those charges are false. More than that, they are not in keeping with the way CIA works. In fact, they are profoundly offensive to the men and women who serve here, as they should be to all Americans.

Suskind claims that, in September 2003, the White House ordered then-Director George Tenet to fabricate a letter describing a level of cooperation between Saddam Hussein and al-Qa’ida that simply did not exist. The White House has denied making that request, and Director Tenet has denied receiving it. The former Agency officers Suskind cites in his narrative have, for their part, publicly denied being asked to carry out such a mission.

Those denials are powerful in and of themselves. But they are also backed by a thorough, time-consuming records search within CIA and by interviews with other officers—senior and junior alike—who were directly involved in Iraq operations. To assert, as Suskind does, that the White House would request such a document, and that the Agency would accept such a task, says something about him and nothing about us. It did not happen. Moreover, as the public record shows, CIA had concluded—and conveyed to our customers—that the ties between Saddam Hussein and al-Qa’ida were not as close as some believed.

While recounting his tale, Suskind has accused the Agency of violating the National Security Act. That basic law specifically prohibits covert actions “intended to influence United States political processes, public opinion, policies, or media.” CIA knows and respects the legal framework within which our democracy conducts intelligence activities. To state what should be obvious, it is not the policy or practice of this Agency to violate American law.

If that were not enough, Suskind also alleges that the United States knew before the start of hostilities with Iraq that Saddam Hussein had no stockpiles of WMD. That, too, is both false and wrong. False because the Intelligence Community assessed that Saddam Hussein had such weapons. Wrong because it implies the Community chose to ignore information of which it was genuinely convinced. Nothing could be further from the truth. Nor did CIA pay or resettle Tahir Habbush, Saddam Hussein’s intelligence chief. That conclusion comes from a review of our files and checks with our officers. Indeed, our government considers Habbush to be a wanted man.

Two former senior British intelligence officers have also released statements taking issue with Suskind. They each describe his work as “misleading.” CIA has made its own inquiries overseas and no one—no individual and no intelligence service—has substantiated Suskind’s account of Habbush or the bogus letter. At this point, the origins of the forgery, like the whereabouts of Habbush himself, remain unclear. But this much is certain: Suskind is off the mark.

Intelligence is a difficult profession. We are typically called upon to uncover information that the enemies of our country are most eager to conceal. When we fall short in that tough mission, we acknowledge our errors and learn from them. We are accustomed to criticism. But Suskind goes well beyond rational critique. Frankly, those he maligns with his book deserve far better.