

# Ian Masters' Background Briefing

*Public Affairs radio broadcasting covering national security, domestic and foreign policy since 1982.  
Sundays 11am – 1pm Pacific, airing on KPFK public radio 90.7fm to nearly all of southern and central California  
[www.ianmasters.org](http://www.ianmasters.org).*

Contact: Louis Vandenberg, producer (951) 318-7410, [ljvandenberg@msn.com](mailto:ljvandenberg@msn.com)

## **Full transcript of Ian Masters' interview with Vincent Cannistraro, April 3, 2005, 11am pdt, on Los Angeles public radio.**

Ian Masters: I'm speaking with Vincent Cannistraro, who was the former head of Counterterrorism operations at the CIA and also the intelligence director at the National Security Council during President Reagan's administration and, obviously, Vincent Cannistraro you've been following President Bush's commission's report that came out this week, featuring fairly much, in terms of the press coverage, questions about "Curveball," apparently a very appropriately named agent that the German intelligence was working. And, apparently his intelligence was heavily relied upon as a justification for going into war, particularly a lot of his claims ending up in the speech that Colin Powell made before the UN. And apparently, though, from the very beginning, the Germans were letting our side know that the guy was a fabricator and was, in fact, crazy. First of all, I didn't think the CIA relied that heavily upon foreign intelligence. I thought there was a kind of professional sense that our taxpayers give us \$30 billion dollars a year, we should be able to do this on our own and not rely on others. First of all, address that, sort of, cultural question if you will.

Vincent Cannistraro: Well, I think in the case of Iraq, there were special circumstances, because the CIA does not have a good network of Iraqi sources in place, even though Iraq had become the forefront of US policy all the way back to the Gulf War in 1991. So, there was a dearth of information coming from CIA's own sources and, secondly, there was an awful lot of so-called information coming from Iraqi exiles, primarily Ahmed Chalabi's INC—the Iraqi National Congress. And that seemed to have a very receptive audience in some areas of the government, particularly at the Defense Department and at the Vice President's office. These were reports that tended to support the preconception of the administration that Saddam Hussein needed to be gotten rid of, and the primary reason for doing that was that he was in imminent possession of weapons of mass destruction, which could be turned against the United States of America, or its allies. So, in that kind of environment where there's a tremendous policy need for information and you don't have a great deal of source information that's proprietary, then that's how information that seems to be comprehensive, coming in from a foreign source, is overemphasized.

IM: Well, in this case, the Germans had told the CIA's head of the European desk on the operations side, Tyler Drumheller, who I spoke to, but he wasn't comfortable going on the radio. He was told by Curveball's handlers in Germany that the guy was crazy and a fabricator and the real question, I guess, is he passed this information on to the top people inside the agency, the Deputy Director McLaughlin and the Director George Tenet, both of whom are now—well, I don't know about McLaughlin. He works for CNN. But, I believe George Tenet says he doesn't remember the conversation.

VC: Well, I think there's no question that there's a sequence of events that still remains a bit clouded, mainly because the report itself indicts the whole incident as an egregious example of a failure of intelligence. To put it in some perspective, Curveball was an Iraqi chemical engineer, who allegedly defected and showed up at a refugee camp in Germany. He was then being exploited by German intelligence for information. Allied countries to the United States had all been alerted to the US need for information on Iraq and on weapons of mass destruction programs in Iraq. And so, the Germans exploited this information. But the first cut of the information was passed to the DIA, not to the CIA. That's the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Pentagon's intelligence collection unit. And that information then was disseminated by DIA to CIA, so CIA never had any direct access to Curveball, a codename provided by the Germans to this defector source. The interesting thing to me is that the only DIA analyst who ever met with Curveball, who went to Germany and was given access to him, came back with an assessment which was very, very negative. The problem was: what happened to his assessment? It didn't get reported up through the senior levels of DIA, and therefore it didn't get disseminated to CIA, until the Germans were directly queried by CIA on Curveball. That's when they said, "look this guy may be a fabricator, don't trust any of his information." His information had already gotten into the system, because it had been disseminated by the head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, and it had been distributed through our government, where of course in some sectors, particularly the Defense Department policy maker—civilian policy makers and at the Vice President's office—where it found an extremely receptive audience. It was believed, because it fit the preconceptions of those policy makers. Now, why did the CIA, which ultimately was responsible for putting the National Intelligence Estimate together in 2002, which was the most critical assessment of any intelligence report that the US government has to offer—why did that information get in there and play a part in its key judgment of alleged WMD programs by Saddam Hussein? And that's the question which is still not answered. We do know that some of the analysts at CIA were very suspicious of the Curveball information, as well as information provided by other so-called Iraqi defectors in exile. But that information, that assessment, was reported up through the chain of command at CIA, but apparently nothing was done about it. So, nothing was done to dampen down the expectations of some of the senior policy makers that this was genuine information. And it got in, as we know, to Secretary of State Colin Powell's address to the United Nations Security Council, with disastrous results, because the information was totally false. I think, at the time, some analysts that I spoke to were very critical of the information, but they were not able to impress senior leadership, meaning George Tenet and John McLaughlin, his deputy, with their doubts. Their doubts were never reflected, either in Colin Powell's speech, or in the National Intelligence Estimate itself.

IM: And, Vincent Cannistraro, the importance of the NIE, the National Intelligence Estimate, is that that was the document upon which the Senators made that vote, and of course, the most fateful vote of all was John Kerry's vote, which was to support the war, or to authorize the use of force.

VC: Absolutely. The NIE is considered most important intelligence analysis that the US government produces. It's supposed to reflect the collective wisdom of the intelligence community on a particular issue. And that's why, while its being supervised by a member of the National Intelligence Council, which is at CIA, all the intelligence community members play a role in contributing to it. And in this case, the minority opinions of some agencies, such as Department of Energy, Department of State, were relegated to minor footnotes, which really didn't capture the attention of the reader of the NIE itself. So, yes, the NIE, which as we know now was corrupted by false intelligence and in some cases fabricated—deliberately fabricated—information, it played a critical role in getting the US Senate to vote in favor of war with Iraq.

IM: And, Vincent Cannistraro, at the time you were quoted in some articles I was just reading that you had heard of dissent within the agency and people that were being, sort of, steamrolled by the administration. Give us some sense of what was happening at the time. Having spoken, again, with the key guy in the agency, Tyler Drumheller, he said, he understood that on the analysis side, there were people that actually either were fired or quit. Not so much on the operations side that he was a part of, but on the analysis side there was some real frustration apparently.

VC: Well, there was a tremendous amount of pressure on the analysts and even though the Silberman-Robb report dismisses political pressure on the process—they were not given that as an assignment by the President—they weren't allowed . . .

IM: Well, that wouldn't . . . you couldn't . . . we shouldn't be surprised by that, Vincent.

VC: No, we're not surprised by it. But, the point is that it's being taken as conventional wisdom that there really wasn't any pressure by policy makers on the analytical process itself. And that's just simply not true. It's simply not true because analysts, generally, are like anyone else. They are concerned about their careers, their futures. Many of them are ambitious. If they understand that a dissenting opinion against the conventional policy wisdom is heard, that it's going to affect their careers. There was a chilled environment in which to express any kind of opposite opinion. And, not only that, there wasn't very much of a reception at the senior levels of the CIA, at George Tenet's level, for example, because he was a very political director. And he was very concerned about getting along in the administration. He was formerly a Democrat, appointed by a Democratic President and he had to stay on in a Republican administration. And he had to compete with a Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, who really didn't want the CIA playing a large role in the intelligence community, and wanted to supplant that role. So, George had a more political bent. He wanted to get along, and therefore he had to play along. And "playing along" really meant to sustain the conceptions of the policy makers,

particularly at the Pentagon and the Vice President's office, that Saddam Hussein was a real and imminent danger. And to do that, you had to accept some of these alarming reports that kept coming in, being fed by Ahmed Chalabi and his INC group. In many cases, the information was fabricated. Information, for example, about an alleged attempt by Saddam Hussein to acquire nuclear material, uranium, from Niger. This, we know now, was all based on fabricated documents. But it's not clear yet, either from this report, or from any other report, who fabricated the documents. The documents were fabricated by supporters of the policy in the United States. The policy being that you had to invade Iraq in order to get rid of Saddam Hussein, and you had to do it soon to avoid the catastrophe that would be produced by Saddam Hussein's use of alleged weapons of mass destruction.

IC: Well, in the case of Ambassador Wilson, who publicly refuted the claims, particularly the sixteen words in the President's State of the Union address that the Iraqis were trying to buy significant quantities of uranium from Niger. That document, I understand, was fabricated . . . it originally came out of Italian intelligence, I think SISME, or SISDE—I'm not sure which one.

VC: It was SISME, yeah.

IM: So, there again, is the same pattern, if there's a pattern there with the Germans, you know. I mean, where you were the Intelligence Director at the National Security Council under President Reagan, that was the time, I recall, when there was a very, very important defector Oleg Gordievski, that the British were running. I believe there was a lot of professional jealousy in the agency that the Brits had such a good source high in the Kremlin. Correct me, if I'm wrong, they assigned, of all people, Aldrich Ames to find out who the Brits had. Aldrich Ames eventually dropped a dime on Gordievski. He handed his name over . . .

VC: Unfortunately, but not before the Brits were able to get him out.

IM: Right. So, it's an amazing story, in fact.

VC: It is. I think that is an amazing story, but I don't think it's really paralleled so much during the nineteen . . . during the two-thousands when we're talking about acquiring information on Iraq. It isn't that anyone had a good source on Iraq—there weren't any good sources. The Italian intelligence service, the military intelligence service, was acquiring information that was really being hand-fed to them by very dubious sources. The Niger documents, for example, which apparently were produced in the United States, yet were funneled through the Italians.

IM: Do we know who produced those documents? Because there's some suspicion . . .

VC: I think I do, but I'd rather not speak about it right now, because I don't think it's a proven case . . .

IM: If I said “Michael Ledeen” . . . ?

VC: You’d be very close . . .

IM: Well, again, Vincent Cannistraro, the feeling you get is that, from going back to, let’s agree that 9/11 is the greatest intelligence catastrophe since Pearl Harbor, and then the WMD catastrophe that followed it. These are two huge embarrassments and it seems to be that the way the White House has handled it’s as though you have a car accident. And instead of blaming the driver, you are blaming the car here. So, do you believe that, you know, that this process . . . whether it was the intention or not, it’s certainly worked out in such a way to exonerate the White House and to lay the blame with the wrong . . .

VC: I think that’s certainly the objective. To lay it off to the intelligence community. But, it’s very disingenuous. It’s like saying, ok, the intelligence community that we whipped into a frenzy in order to provide information to sustain our policy conclusions that Saddam had a WMD program and that he was an imminent danger . . . that that intelligence community provided information that now turns out not to be correct, and that’s why we were misled into saying what we did say, and doing what we did do. And that’s very disingenuous, because that’s not the case at all. The case was that this was not a fact-based policy that the US government adopted. It was a policy-based decision that drove the intelligence, and not the other way around. And that’s, of course, the reverse of the process. You had a lot of people who played along to get along, and they understood that in that kind of administration, you couldn’t say exactly what it is that you really believed. Now, having said all that, it’s not to exonerate the intelligence community, because, clearly, there were major gaps. And I think the major gap was the failure of, specifically the CIA and the DIA, to develop their own proprietary Iraqi sources that could be in a position to give them the kind of information they really needed, rather than having this dependence on foreign sources that you did not have direct access to. There’s nothing wrong in dealing with a liaison and sharing information. But, to be utterly a hundred percent, not one hundred percent, let’s say, but ninety-eight percent dependent on such sources is a telling criticism of the American intelligence community for having failed to recognize that this was a priority that they needed to develop sources on. They had plenty of time to do it. They didn’t do it. And, again, you see some of this married in some of the other intelligence failures, such as 9/11 and the failure to penetrate al Qaeda. The problem really began when there was no appreciation for what al Qaeda was. That it was a threat. And I think that’s the same rationale that drove the Iraqi programs as well.

IM: But, just in closing Vincent Cannistraro, this particular White House coined the phrase “the axis of evil,” naming Iraq, Iran and North Korea, and it’s worth noting that all three of those countries . . . we didn’t have any diplomatic relations with, going back to the first Gulf War in ’91, or ’90 I guess the embassy was closed. In fact, Ambassador Joe Wilson closed the embassy.

VC: Right.

IM: Then, Iran, where there's rumors of war, in terms of some pre-emption against their developing nuclear weapons and North Korean estimates are that they had maybe two, now since they've been reprocessing fuel rods for plutonium, they have up to six. Again, we don't have any representation. So, isn't that the heart of the problem, that we, basically, . . . you've got all the overhead collections from the satellites, but, unless you have people on the ground, you're flying blind. And it gets to the real question, which is why do we have this foreign policy rigidity here, where we don't recognize these countries. I mean, couldn't you just recognize these countries just for the sake of getting people in there?

VC: Well, I mean, it's a good point. The question is the areas where we are very deficient on in terms of understanding the societies and understanding the policy decisions that are being made in those societies are areas where we have no official representation. We have no real official dialog. And that is part of the problem. In that kind of absence of contact, you're really susceptible to people who have their own agenda, primarily exiles. North Korea is an example where we don't know in the US government how many weapons they may have. There are estimates which range from four, which is the last one I've seen at the CIA, to fourteen, which comes out of DIA. That's a huge disparity in estimate. And it just really tells you that we just don't have solid information. And when you don't, how do you devise a rational policy to deal with those countries. And I think the one spin-off from the Silberman-Robb report, as well as other reports that were made by the Senate and the National Commission on Terrorism, will be to cast doubt on the basis of any aggressive policies that the Bush administration takes against Iran, in particular, over the next few years.

IM: I thank you very much for joining us in Los Angeles, Vincent Cannistraro.

VC: Thank you.

Transcript by Background Briefing producer Louis Vandenberg