On the Brink

Tyler Drumheller

On the evening before Colin Powell’s notorious speech to the United Nations regarding the threat from Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, CIA Director George Tenet telephoned his Chief of Europe Tyler Drumheller to discuss the text. At the end of the conversation Drumheller repeated a warning that the “Curveball” reporting passed on by the German BND was not reliable and should not be used in the address. Tenet laughed and told him not to worry. The following day, as Drumheller watched from his corner office on the fifth floor of CIA headquarters, Powell outlined the case for war with Iraq using the Curveball material as the centerpiece of his argument. Drumheller, a veteran of 30 years in the field as a CIA case officer, was stunned, asking his chief of staff if they had perhaps failed to send forward the corrections to Powell’s speech made three days early; she laughed and said, oh we sent the corrected version, they just ignored you.

At the same time, Drumheller reflected on the information just obtained by one of his best, and most colorful officers from a high level penetration of the Iraqi government; reporting that confirmed his doubts about Curveball, stating unequivocally that, in real terms, Saddam had no nuclear or biological weapons programs, and only rudimentary and unreliable stocks of poison gas. Tenet and the officers running the invasion of Iraq dismissed this because it did not fit their preconceptions, however; at that moment Drumheller’s man was on a whirlwind adventure in Jakarta and Cairo following up on the material. At this point the Chief of the Near East, whose nickname in the service was Iago, told him to call off the trip, saying that “you guys just don’t get it, this is no longer about intel, it is about regime change. Sure we may not find WMD in the way described, but when we march into Baghdad we will find something, and frankly no one will give a damn. When this kicks off we are going to have us a hootenanny.” At that moment Drumheller realized that his days in the CIA, all of the years in Africa, Europe, and the East were going to end unhappily, he reflected that it was kind of funny that successful careers in the agency always seem to end on some note of controversy and frustration.

Move forward two years, February 2005, Drumheller is preparing to retire at 52 out of frustration with the Bush administration and the entire affair. He is called to testify before the Silverman – Robb Commission on the WMD issue and the start of the war, which had now turned into a bloody disaster. He tells the story, as he always does, without making any judgments. At the end Senator McCain said, “so they just cherry picked the intel.” Leaving the session Drumheller is stopped by one of the committee staffers who asks if he wants to see the testimony of Tenet and his deputy John Mclaughlin. Having had close personal relationships with both men he is shocked to see that neither one remembers any warnings, or any of the conflicting intelligence. He now knew what people meant when they said your blood runs cold. Tenet remembers no warnings, and never mentions the Powell phone call, while Mclaughlin denies having spoken to him in late January 2003 when Drumheller told him that the Curveball material might well be a fabrication; to which Mclaughlin said; “oh my, I hope not, that is the only tangible material we have.”

When the Silverman - Robb report is published Tenet and Mclaughlin, supported by republican members of congress and their staffs attack Drumheller, accuse him of creating a story to make himself look better. Later in his book Tenet dedicates 9 pages to a convoluted rebuttal of Drumheller’s statements and a personal attack. In the end everyone knows the story, as it comes out in bits and pieces, and everything Drumheller and his assistants said was proven true. They also find that the second report from the cabinet member was suppressed for two years; a report that if it had come out may have blocked British participation in the invasion of Iraq (now the subject of a BBC documentary.) Drumheller went on with his life, seeing his argument increasingly accepted as the story behind the invasion. However the arguments against his actions continue, the common theme deteriorating; so would you rather have Saddam still in power.

As Chief of Europe Drumheller participated in the early build up for the Iraq war, even prior to 9/11; working to identify the real nature of the Iraqi threat through Turkey and Western Europe. This began at the mid-night dinner with Tenet and the leaders of the British Intelligence services on September 12, 2001, continuing the following Sunday with Cofer Black at the British embassy, where the Brits were given the war plan. At the first meeting the senior British officer present urged Tenet to focus on al Qai’da and not be distracted by Iraq. Tenet said that he and Powell agreed but added that this was not the feeling in the rest of the administration. As they left the meeting a senior Brit quietly described; “all quite blood-curdling.”

As time moved on toward the events of the fall 2002, Drumheller supported Tenet at many sessions, including the July 20, 2002 Downing Street memo meetings with the Chief of SIS. As time went on he saw that the matter was being driven by preconceptions, political and bureaucratic inertia, and a maddening desire to tell the President what he wanted to hear. In the end, having naively assumed that if he reported accurately regarding Curveball and the Cabinet source, he would carry out his professional responsibility, C/Eur found himself and a small group of supporters standing against the weight of the entire US government; as Mclaughlin was quoted as saying to one dissenting analyst, the bar on reporting to support the operation is very low, while the bar on intelligence that might stand against it is unbelievably high. This went against everything Drumheller had learned in his carrier, putting him at odds with the institution that had shaped his life.

And in the end he is haunted by the thousands of dead and wounded Americans and Iraqis; wondering what else he could have done.