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CIA More Fully Denies Deception About Iraq

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Saturday, August 23, 2008; A03

The controversy over a best-selling author's account of forgery and deception in the [White House](#) deepened yesterday with a new [CIA](#) denial that it helped the Bush administration produce phony documents suggesting past links between [al-Qaeda](#) and [Saddam Hussein](#).

Author [Ron Suskind](#)'s book "The Way of the World," released earlier this month, contends that the White House learned in early 2003 that the Iraqi president no longer possessed weapons of mass destruction but went to war regardless. Suskind wrote that the information was passed to British and U.S. intelligence officials in secret meetings with Tahir Habbush, Iraq's spy chief at the time.

Moreover, in an allegation that implies potentially criminal acts by administration officials, the author wrote that White House officials ordered a forgery to influence public opinion about the war. The book contends that the CIA paid Habbush \$5 million and resettled him in Jordan after the war. Then, it says, in late 2003, the White House ordered the CIA to enlist Habbush's help in concocting a fake letter that purported to show that Iraq helped train [Mohamed Atta](#), the Egyptian-born al-Qaeda terrorist who led the 19 hijackers in the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. Such a letter surfaced in Iraq in December 2003, but its authenticity quickly came into question.

The CIA and White House denied Suskind's account when the book was first released. But yesterday, the CIA issued a more extensive rebuttal based on what the agency called an internal investigation involving a records search and interviews with junior and senior officers who were directly involved in the agency's Iraq operations at the time. As for the claim that the White House ordered the CIA to forge a letter, the agency said: "It did not happen."

"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," the agency said in a prepared statement. "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."

Suskind, whose claims are now the subject of two congressional investigations, yesterday continued to stand by his book and accused the CIA and White House of orchestrating a smear campaign. "It's the same old stuff," said Suskind, who said his findings are supported by hours of interviews, some of

them taped. "There's not a shred of doubt about any of it."

The CIA statement noted that any covert action intended to influence U.S. public opinion about the war would be illegal under the National Security Act. "To state what should be obvious, it is not the policy or practice of this Agency to violate American law," the agency stated.

Former CIA director [George J. Tenet](#), whom the book depicts as passing along White House forgery requests to his deputies, echoed the agency's denial. "It is ridiculous to think that the White House would give me such an order and even more ridiculous to think that I would carry it out," Tenet said in a statement e-mailed to journalists. He noted that, during his time as CIA chief, he had "consistently fought with some Administration officials to prevent them from overstating the case for Iraqi involvement in international terrorism."

The book's claims are the subject of official inquiries by House and Senate oversight committees. On Thursday, [House Judiciary Committee](#) Chairman [John Conyers Jr.](#) (D-Mich.) issued letters to former and current CIA officials asking for information about the alleged forgeries.

In his book, Suskind names several CIA and British intelligence officials as sources for his accounts of the secret Habbush meetings and alleged forgery. But four of the quoted officials have since disputed portions of Suskind's account. Suskind fired back by publishing what his Web site says is a partial transcript of an interview with Rob Richer, a former CIA official who appears to express knowledge of the forged letter. Richer, who has since retired from the agency, has said the book misrepresents his conversations with Suskind.

Richer said he agreed with the CIA's statement and contended that the forgery narrative described by Suskind "never happened."

Suskind, a former [Pulitzer Prize](#)-winning reporter for the [Wall Street Journal](#), said he believes his sources have been pressured to contradict him. "The White House is focusing on this because there may be legal complications for the administration," he said.

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