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How Did a 2005 Estimate Go Awry?

By [WILLIAM J. BROAD](#) and [DAVID E. SANGER](#)

WASHINGTON, Dec. 3 — In the summer of 2005, senior American intelligence officials began traveling the world with a secret slide show drawn from thousands of pages that they said were downloaded from a stolen Iranian laptop computer, trying to prove that [Iran](#) was lying when it said it had no interest in building a nuclear weapon.

The slides detailed efforts to build what looked like a compact warhead for an Iranian missile and were portrayed by the Americans as suggesting that the Iranian military was working to solve the technical problems in building a bomb.

Now, that assertion has been thrown into doubt by a surprising reversal: the conclusion, contained in the declassified summary of a new National Intelligence Estimate on Iran's nuclear programs, that Iran's effort to master the technology of building a nuclear weapon had halted two years before those briefings.

At the time of the laptop slide show, some European and [United Nations](#) officials questioned what they were being shown. "I can fabricate that data," one said at the time. "It looks beautiful, but it is open to doubt."

At the time, almost no one in the White House or the intelligence community is known to have seriously considered the idea that the weapons program might have been stopped. And the new intelligence

assessment does not, as far as is known, suggest that the information relied on in 2005 was fabricated.

Perhaps the slide show presented by the Americans in 2005 was simply outdated — the laptop's data and other information, like the light from a distant star, taking years to arrive at the lenses of the intelligence gatherers.

The assessment does not explain — unless it is addressed in more than 130 pages still marked classified — how the May 2005 conclusion that Iran was still pressing ahead with a nuclear weapons program went awry.

President Bush himself has said on several occasions that he knew that proving the Iranian case to the world would be difficult. “People will say, if we're trying to make the case on Iran, well, the intelligence failed in Iraq, therefore, how can we trust the intelligence in Iran?” he said at a news conference in 2005. He concluded that building pressure on Iran “requires people to believe that the Iranian nuclear program is, to a certain extent, ongoing.”

Now, he could end his presidency with even his own intelligence apparatus uncertain about Iran's true intentions.

“This report will be used to undercut our efforts to build a consensus that Iran must suspend its enrichment program, playing to those who support concessions and undermining the prospects for effective pressure on the regime,” said Robert G. Joseph, who helped to build the case against Iran in the Bush White House during the first term and moved to the State Department in the second term.

Mr. Joseph, who in 2005 was one of the officials who gave briefings on the laptop evidence, said Monday he could not recall “any suggestion in the intelligence that Iran was doing anything other than moving full speed ahead.”

Mr. Joseph's skepticism is shared by some current officials, mostly hawks, who believe, as he does, that Iran is ultimately seeking a weapons capability. But the officials would not publicly challenge the new finding.

Several officials said that if the new National Intelligence Estimate is right, Iran's strategy was an unusual one. It might be the first country in nuclear history to halt a covert program to make nuclear weapons, then speed up its program to enrich nuclear fuel, as it did in 2006, in very public defiance of international pressures to stop.

A senior administration official speculated that Iran may have concluded that the risk of getting caught with a covert weapons program was simply too high — especially after the United States presented evidence of secret programs to North Korea in 2002 and Libya in 2003. The official said that perhaps Iran wanted to master the hardest part of the process first — making nuclear fuel — before risking the next step, designing a weapon.

Another official, a senior nuclear specialist with long technical experience in proliferation issues, said it was also possible that Iran had made so much progress in its clandestine work that the 2003 halt might have little practical significance, as long as it can keep working on its open efforts to produce fuel suitable for a weapon. "One scenario is that they've already solved all the weapons physics problems and are just waiting for the material," he said.

But he conceded the other possibility, expressed by the intelligence analysis, "that they were spooked by the perceived pressures and decided to back away."

[International Atomic Energy Agency](#) inspectors have found that Iran, working in secrecy for 18 years, from 1985 to 2003, pursued many technologies to enrich uranium. Iran said it was simply seeking to enrich uranium to produce electricity, and had to do so in secret because Europe, Israel and the United States would try to deny it technology.

Much of Iran's clandestine work violated Iran's obligations under the 1968 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, which requires signatories to fully disclose their atomic labors. At the same time, Iran made no secret of its ambitions to build large rockets and warheads that were ideally suited for delivering nuclear arms. For two decades, with the aid of North Korea, the Iranians have developed generations of long-range rockets.

The problem the administration faces now is that it is declaring that Iran stopped its nuclear weapons development with the same certainty that it insisted two years ago that the program was speeding ahead. Asked Monday to explain how that was possible, [Stephen J. Hadley](#), the national security adviser, said simply: “Iran is one of a handful of the hardest intelligence targets going. They are very good at this business of keeping secrets.”

William J. Broad reported from New York, and David E. Sanger from Washington.