

Britain can't handle the truth

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With its troops no longer engaged in military operations inside Iraq, Britain has been liberated politically to conduct a post-mortem of that conflict, including the sensitive issue of the primary justification used by then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, for going to war, namely Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, or WMD.

The failure to find any weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, following the March 2003 invasion and subsequent occupation of that country by US and British troops, continues to haunt those who were involved in making the decision for war. The issue of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, and the role it played in influencing the decision for war, is at the centre of the ongoing Iraq war inquiry being conducted by Sir John Chilcot.

Among the more compelling testimonies provided to date has been that of Sir Christopher Meyer, the former British Ambassador to the United States who served in that capacity during the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq. Meyer convincingly portrayed an environment where the decision by the US to invade Iraq, backed by Blair, precluded any process (such as viable UN weapons inspections) that sought to compel Iraq to prove it had no WMD. Rather, Britain and the US were left 'scrambling' to find evidence of a 'smoking gun' to prove Iraq indeed possessed the weapons of mass destruction it was accused of having.

In short, Saddam had been found guilty of possessing weapons of mass destruction, and his sentence had been passed down by Washington and London void of any hard evidence that such weapons, or even related

programmes, even existed. The sentence meted out – regime termination – mandated such a massive deployment of troops and material that all but the wilfully blind or intentionally ignorant had to know by the early autumn of 2002 that war with Iraq was inevitable. One simply does not initiate the movement of hundreds of thousands of troops, thousands of armoured vehicles and aircraft, and dozens of ships on a whim or to reinforce an idle threat.

President George Bush was able to disguise his blatant militarism behind the false sincerity of his ally Blair and his own secretary of state, Colin Powell. The President's task was made far easier given the role of useful idiot played by much of the mainstream media in the US and Britain, where reporters and editors alike dutifully repeated both the hyped-up charges levied against Iraq and the false pretensions that a diplomatic solution was being sought.

The tragic final act of the farce directed by Bush and Blair was the theatre of war justification known as UN weapons inspections. Having played the weapons of mass destruction card so forcefully in an effort to justify war with Iraq, the US (and by extension, Britain) were compelled once again to revisit the issue of disarmament. But the reality was that disarming Iraq was the furthest thing from the mind of either Bush or Blair. The decision to use military force to overthrow Saddam was made by these two leaders independent of any proof that Iraq was in possession of weapons of mass destruction. Having found Iraq guilty, the last thing those who were positioning themselves for war wanted was to re-engage a process that not only had failed to uncover any evidence of Iraq's retention of weapons of mass destruction in the past, but was actually positioned to produce fact-based evidence that would either contradict or significantly weaken the case for war already endorsed by Bush and Blair.

The US and Britain had both abandoned aggressive UN weapons inspections in the spring of 1998. UN weapons inspectors were able and willing to conduct intrusive no-notice inspections of any site inside Iraq, including those associated with the Iraqi president, if it furthered their mandate of disarmament. But the US viewed such inspections as useful only in so far as they either manufactured a crisis that produced justification for military intervention (as was the case with inspections in March and December 1998), or sustained the notion of continued Iraqi non-compliance so as to justify the continuation of economic sanctions. An inspection process that diluted arguments of Iraq's continued retention of weapons of mass destruction by failing to uncover any hard evidence that would sustain such allegations, or worse, sustain Iraq's contention that it

had no such weaponry, was not in the interest of US policy objectives that sought regime change, and as such required the continuation of stringent economic sanctions linked to Iraq's disarmament obligation.

The British were never willing (or able) to confront meaningfully the American policy of abusing the legitimate inspection-based mandate of the UN inspectors. Instead, London sought to manage inspection-based confrontation by insisting that before any intrusive inspection could be carried out, it would have to be backed by high-quality intelligence. But even this position collapsed in the face of an American decision, made in April 1998, to stop supporting aggressive inspections altogether.

In the end, the British were left with the role of fabricating legitimacy for an American policy of terminating weapons inspections in Iraq, supplying dated intelligence of questionable veracity about a secret weapons cache being stored in the basement of a Ba'ath party headquarters in Baghdad, which was used to trigger an inspection the US hoped the Iraqis would balk at. When the Iraqis (as hoped) balked, the US ordered the inspectors out of Iraq, leading to the initiation of Operation Desert Fox, a 72-hour bombing campaign designed to ensure that Iraq would not allow the return of UN inspectors, effectively keeping UN sanctions 'frozen' in place.

As of December 1998, both the US and Britain knew there was no 'smoking gun' in Iraq that could prove that Saddam's government was retaining or reconstituting a weapons of mass destruction capability. Nothing transpired between that time and when the decision was made in 2002 to invade Iraq that fundamentally altered that basic picture.

But having decided on war using weapons of mass destruction as the justification, both the US and Britain began the process of fabricating a case after the fact. Lacking new intelligence data on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, both nations resorted to either recycling old charges that had been disproved by UN inspectors in the past, or fabricating new charges that would not withstand even the most cursory of investigations.

The reintroduction of UN weapons inspectors into Iraq in November 2002 was counterproductive for those who were using weapons of mass destruction as an excuse for war. This was aptly demonstrated when, in the first weeks following their return to Iraq, the inspectors discredited almost all of the intelligence-based charges both the US and Britain had levelled against Iraq, while failing to uncover any evidence of the massive stockpile of weapons of mass destruction that Iraq had been accused of retaining.

The decision for war had been made independently of any viable

intelligence information on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. As such, the work of the UN weapons inspectors inside Iraq following their return in November 2002 was not a factor in influencing the lead-up to the actual invasion of Iraq. Having decided that Saddam was guilty of possessing weapons of mass destruction, the failure of the UN weapons inspectors to uncover evidence of such retention made their efforts not only irrelevant, but undesirable. The inconvenience of the UN weapons inspectors when it comes to the truth about the lead-up to the war with Iraq continues to this day.

The parade of British diplomats and officials appearing before the Chilcot hearings rightly point out the absolute lack of any 'smoking gun' concerning Iraq and weapons of mass destruction. But until Chilcot receives testimony from those best positioned to speak about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction programmes, namely the UN weapons inspectors themselves, all the hearings will succeed in doing is sustain the false appearance of well-meaning British officials, stampeded into a war with Iraq by an overbearing American ally, looking in vain for a 'smoking gun' that would justify their decision to invade. The evidence needed to undermine any weapons of mass destruction-based case for war, derived from the work of the UN weapons inspectors, was always available to those officials in a position to weigh in on this matter, but either never consulted or deliberately ignored.

There is a big difference between searching for a 'smoking gun' and searching for the truth. By ignoring and/or undermining the work of the UN weapons inspectors in the lead-up to the war with Iraq, British officials demonstrated that they were not interested in the truth about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, a fact that testimony provided by the likes of Sir Christopher Meyer alludes to, but falls short of actually stating.

The search for truth can be an inconvenient process, especially when it threatens to expose potentially illegal activities in the prosecution of an unpopular war. Until he calls upon UN weapons inspectors themselves to deliver testimony before his inquiry, Sir John Chilcot perpetuates the perception that Britain simply can't handle the truth when it comes to uncovering the level of official British culpability in the deliberate fabrication of a case for war against Iraq that everyone knew, or should have known, was false.

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