

Failing Intelligence

Brian Jones

Dr Jones was head of the UK Defence Intelligence Staff's nuclear, biological and chemical weapons section in the build up to the invasion and occupation of Iraq. This article is based on a lecture he gave at the Royal United Services Institute in September 2010 to launch his book, Failing Intelligence: The true story of how we were fooled into going to war in Iraq (£9.99 BiteBack).

In the year or so following my retirement in early 2003, I gave evidence on intelligence and weapons of mass destruction to two of the four inquiries on Iraq – namely Hutton and Butler. I was less than completely satisfied with what emerged from these, and indeed the other two inquiries, by the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Intelligence and Security Committee, so, through 2004, I wrote a number of articles and gave a number of interviews trying to clarify what I believed had happened and what had been missed.

Going in to 2005, I was becoming increasingly frustrated with what I saw as the failure of my attempts to explain, in the space or time available, the whole complex of issues that lay behind the mistake that had been made on Iraq and WMD. These issues include:

- the weird, sometimes wonderful, and often frustrating world of intelligence
- the confusing practices and processes of the Whitehall machine and the governance that emanates from it, and
- the technically complicated subjects of nuclear, chemical and biological agents and weapons which are quite different one from another in terms of their utility, potential and control.

It was then I decided it would take a book to do all these things properly, and that is where most of my energies on this subject went to after that. I have divided my book into four parts:

- I Context
- II Deception
- III Cover-up, and
- IV Conclusion

I use the Context to try and explain the background to some of the issues I mentioned a moment ago, using the experience of my

own introduction to them to aid my description. Then I spend some time in the period 1990-2000, discussing the intelligence background to the first Gulf War and the difficulty of establishing that Iraq had disarmed. I also raise the issue of whether it was ever the intention of the US to let Saddam off the hook by allowing that he had disarmed. In other words, would that eventuality ever have been in line with the US Liberation Act that President Clinton signed in 1998 and some believe had been unofficial US policy since the administration of George Bush Senior, in the early 1990s.

The impact of 9/11 in 2001 is an obvious element in the overall context since it ignited 'the war on terror', Afghanistan and 'enabled' the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. But I also say a little about the impact of the 'anthrax letters' that followed closely on 9/11, and had a great effect on Washington. Some of the witnesses to the Chilcot inquiry have drawn attention to the importance of this incident.

In 'Deception' I look at the events of 2002 starting with the State of the Union address in January, the flurry of papers that followed it in Whitehall before the Crawford summit in April, and finishing with the secret Downing Street meeting of 23 July.

I then discuss the events surrounding the generation of the September 2002 dossier which, depending on who you listen to, was or was not making a case for war. I will return to one aspect of this.

It was in the period between the dossier and the war that I retired, in January 2003. There were several important developments in that period – a fascinating meeting I attended in the Cabinet Office, Bush's UN speech followed by Resolution 1441, Alistair Campbell's dodgy dossier, Colin Powell's speech at the UN, and important resignations from the government on the eve of war.

It is at this point that I discuss how I felt at the time about our participation in the war. There was no justification in terms of Iraq's immediate WMD capabilities because we simply could not be sure they were there. But if you set that aside, I was prepared to admit there could be a 'big picture' case for it – not so much based on Iraq's future WMD capabilities, which now seems to be a favourite fall-back position for Mr Blair and his former staff at No. 10, but for a number of other reasons which I discuss in the book.

I suspect those concerned, both politicians and officials, knew they were taking a risk when they made Iraq's 'current' possession of WMD the overwhelming justification for war. I believe the decisions were taken with the best of intentions by all concerned, and I am not advocating a witch-hunt or the attribution of blame.

But it has been the failure of those involved to acknowledge, in any

substantial way, that the risk they took failed, which prompted me to devote a major part of my book to the ‘Cover-up’ of what happened. Not least because none of the four inquiries completed so far has looked at this aspect, and I see little evidence that this is something the Chilcot Inquiry has pursued. Why is it important?

Because it has obstructed the identification of some important lessons about how things went so horribly wrong, and was a factor in Whitehall choosing to ignore some others that were identified, mainly by the Butler review. It meant that the line the government wanted to draw under the matter could not be drawn, and has still to be drawn. It created the impression of a nation complicit in and supportive of a war that lacked legitimacy, even after it became clear that the WMD justification was without foundation. And it undermined confidence in our politics and governance even before the Expenses Crisis dealt it yet another fearsome blow.

And I conclude my book by discussing the impact I believe all of this is likely to have had on three issues that remain high profile: nuclear, biological and chemical weapons proliferation and arms control, terrorism, and intelligence.

Turning now to the issue I want to focus on in a little more detail. If it was to get the support that would be needed for probable military operations, the government had to convince the public and Parliament of an imminent threat from Iraq’s WMD that was significant enough for British troops to die for. A fundamental requirement for this, of course, was that Iraq had to have significant quantities of chemical or biological weapons to pose such a threat. Intelligence did not allow such an assessment until at least the end of August 2002 when up popped a number of intelligence reports that *some* thought seemed to fit the bill. These arrived in the middle of the assessment process of a Joint Intelligence Committee paper, which was due for approval on 4 September. As it considered the draft assessment, the JIC was told of the important new intelligence that had only recently arrived and the Assessments Staff were told to include some of this before the report was issued. The report was finally issued a few days later, on 9 September.

In fact, the new intelligence, as far as I read the situation, was so weak that the Assessments Staff struggled to use it. In the end they incorporated just one sentence and they buried it deep in the text. It was this:

‘Intelligence also indicates that biological and chemical munitions could be with military units and ready for firing within 20-45 minutes.’

JIC (02) 202, Iraqi use of Chemical Biological Weapons – Possible Scenarios – 9th September 2002

We can discuss why this is such a weak statement, but if it had been true it would not only have shown that Iraq had both chemical and biological munitions, but also that it had them in sufficient quantities for the deployment implied by that statement. We had no other credible evidence that this was the case.

But the statement in the JIC assessment was not strong enough for the Prime Minister's dossier, which was being hurriedly drafted at the same time. The drafters now tried to harden it up for the dossier but the analysts said no, and there was deadlock. Then, suddenly, obviously too late for the JIC paper on 9th September, up popped something else. No. 10 was told about it on 12th September, although on the basis of his evidence to Chilcot, Tony Blair doesn't seem to recall this piece of intelligence. Conveniently, the intelligence says, and we now know it says this much, that production of agent or weapons or both had indeed taken place. Unfortunately, it was from a new source said to be on trial and, as far as I can gather, there was never any collateral around for it except that which was given by each of these reports, the 45 Minute report and this report, which were both from shaky sources. That was the only, relatively poor collateral that seemed to me to exist.

I've call this second report 'Report X' – X for the unknown, because only a very few people knew what was in that report, and I don't think many more people know what was in it to this day. It was not shown to the intelligence analysts at the time – it was said to be too sensitive – but it was enough to break the deadlock.

And this is what happened really. Bearing in mind the weak statement in the JIC paper quoted above, the Joint Intelligence Committee said in its Executive Summary of the dossier

'We judge that some of these weapons are deployable within 45 minutes of an order to use them.'

The Prime Minister then said in his Foreword

'I am in no doubt that the threat is serious and current ... And the document discloses that his [Saddam's] military planning allows for some of the WMD to be ready within 45 minutes of an order to use them.'

Thus the analysts were overruled. The Joint Intelligence Committee could sign off on the dossier, and did not argue, as far as anyone has admitted, with the Prime Minister's assertion that it left no doubt that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction.

Despite not being mentioned in the dossier or, I think, in any JIC

assessment, in the true tradition of the mysterious world of intelligence, it's invisible presence, the invisible presence of Report X, was the single most important element in the government's case for war. We know a remarkable amount about the 45 minute intelligence report, but clearly it was not strong enough to stand alone. It needed to be stood up by Report X. But seven years and four inquiries on, we still know very little about what was actually in Report X. When the experts finally saw it – probably shortly after the war – I understand they dismissed it quite quickly.

The Foreign Affairs Committee Inquiry did not know about this report at all when they conducted their inquiry, and it was kept out of Hutton until I mentioned it in my evidence, which was well into the Inquiry, and after quite a lot of government witnesses had given evidence where it really would have been very much more convenient to talk about it. Hutton, I believe, was never shown the actual report. In fact, the report had been withdrawn even before Hutton started seeing witnesses – and certainly, I did not know that, and I don't think Hutton knew that it had been withdrawn either. The withdrawal was first revealed by the Panorama team, and confirmed within days by the Butler report, six months after Hutton reported.

Reading between the lines of its report, it appears to me, that attempts were made to keep Report X away from the Intelligence and Security Committee, but they did eventually get to see it, and knew it had been withdrawn. But the ISC did not mention either its withdrawal or any uncertainty about its sourcing in its report. The ISC said this of Report X:

‘We were told that there was further intelligence of a nature so sensitive that it was only released on a very restricted basis. We have seen that intelligence and understand the basis on which CDI and the JIC took the view they did.’

Now that sounded to me, at the time, like an endorsement of Report X, and indeed some had suggested it was, both in the House and in evidence to the inquiries. But when I discussed it with a member of the ISC a few months later, I was told that the statement was intended to be obviously Delphic in nature and, whilst the Committee did not endorse the view, it could understand how others might.

The Butler review, of course, did see Report X. The Butler report describes Report X as being from ‘a new source on trial’ and about ‘Iraqi production of chemical and biological agents’ which ‘had been accelerated by the Iraqi regime, including through the building of further facilities throughout Iraq’.

Butler acknowledges that Report X provided significant assurance to

those drafting the dossier that agent was actively being produced, but does not go so far as to explain, very clearly at least, the context of it breaking the deadlock associated with the approval of the dossier by the Defence Intelligence Staff as a body. The withdrawal of Report X in July 2003 is described as being about its sourcing or the lack of reliability of its sourcing.

However, nothing is said, as far as I can see, about the quality of the intelligence contained in the report:

- How much sense did it make?
- How specific was it?
- Did it identify the agents involved?
- Did the source say anything about how they were produced? Or how much was produced?
- Where they were produced and stored?
- Was there significant collateral for what was said?
- Was collateral sought and found between September 2002, when it appeared, and March 2003 when the war began?

We don't know the answers to these questions.

Of the reporting up to the time of the Joint Intelligence Committee's paper of 9 September, Butler commented that 'we were struck by the relative thinness of the intelligence base supporting the greater firmness of the JIC's judgements on Iraqi production and possession of chemical and biological weapons'.

Butler expressed no view on whether it believed Report X added significant depth to that intelligence base. I suspect it did not. And I think it is about time that Parliament and the public were told more about that, and about the retrospective analysis that surely must have been done on that report given its importance. Because I believe that will tell us something about the qualities of the decision made by those who obviously decided it was convincing.

The whole subject of Report X, to my mind, raises important issues about how our intelligence machine worked at that time. Butler did identify a lot of the problems, but there were a few that it did not identify. The implementation of the Butler recommendations has left a few important ones out, and I don't think the potential major flaws in the system have been resolved. In the book I identify what I believe these flaws are. I discuss them, and provide suggestions for their resolution in some detail.

Perhaps it is time for me to give you some bottom lines on the

consequences of the Iraq war that may prove to have significance greater than the war itself.

It is my view that the Iraq war has set back the wider cause of nuclear, biological, chemical arms control and non-proliferation.

It, and other aspects of the 'war on terror', may arguably have pushed some elements of the threat from international terrorism to the right, but I respect the judgements of the former head of MI5, Baroness Manningham-Buller, as she gave them to the Iraq Inquiry. In particular, the war appears to have unleashed something in the UK that might otherwise have been kept in check and, as the recent report of the Royal United Services Institute apparently suggests, there maybe unforeseen consequences in train yet.

Finally, I think British intelligence has yet to recover from the credibility it lost over Iraq. If our Foreign and Defence policy outlook, as a result of the review in progress at the moment, is not to change, then I think this is of great importance. I suggest that the intelligence machine should be subjected to a thorough, independent review and that, perhaps, a major top-end organisational change should be considered.

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