

## Reviews

### Finding square circles in Iraq

**Hans Blix, *Disarming Iraq: The Search for Weapons of Mass Destruction*, Bloomsbury, 285 pages, ISBN 0747573549, £16.99**

**John Prados, *Hoodwinked: The documents that reveal how Bush sold us a war*, New Press, 375 pages, ISBN 1565849027, \$19.95**

There can be few public servants more diligent and persistent than Hans Blix, and few who are more implacably devoted to pursuing their allotted tasks. Enormous pressures were generated by the belligerent powers, with the intention of influencing Blix' findings: it was presumed that Iraq was stiff with weapons of mass destruction, and that all denials of the innumerable allegations about them were simply lies.

Today, this all seems an age ago. Now, nobody believes in the missing arsenal of Saddam Hussein, with the possible exception of the British Prime Minister, who is deeply entrenched in his own fantasy world, where he relives a happy childhood absconding to the Americas and following football folklore in his imagination.

American mobile exploration teams and site survey teams stomped all over Iraq after Hans Blix' UN weapons' inspectors were excluded from that country, and poked into every corner which had been designated by 'intelligence' as key WMD facilities. Bursting into the Iraqi Special Security Organisation, thought to be the agency responsible for Iraq's effort to hide its weapons programmes, one team smashed into a building, and then, through the dark, came upon another locked door. As they breathlessly forced their entry, they were surprised to find a room entirely full of vacuum cleaners. Team 3, headed by Major Kenneth Deal, noisily found a 'smoking gun' when it visited the Ba'ath Party headquarters. After this discovery, a reporter noted: 'Smoking gun is now a term of dark irony here'. The secret documents which were uncovered turned out to be an Arabic version of A. J. P. Taylor's well-known history of *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe*. It may have been useful to Mr. Blair.

Blix was not allowed the time to investigate either Iraqi vacuum cleaners or the selected works of A. J. P. Taylor. His book, which fastidiously records the events in which he was able to take part, and the pressures to which he was subjected, begins by accepting, not without due agnosticism, the possibility that the Iraqi Government might still be dabbling in weapons of mass destruction. From there on, it records a rapid learning curve.

Of course, during the war with Iran, Western powers, and others, were not interested in promoting United Nations enquiries into nuclear or other weapons in Iraq, because they were fully engaged in the effort to modernise Iraqi arms to overthrow the Ayatollahs. Indeed, from Britain, never averse to military waste, this process was apparently funded by Export Credit Guarantees, at no cost whatever to Saddam's exchequer, but to the detriment of the British taxpayer. No doubt unsavoury revelations about this commerce in WMD would have featured

strongly in the Iraqi declaration on its weapons programmes, submitted in response to Resolution 1441 of the Security Council, and subsequently censored so that only permanent members of the Security Council were allowed to read the lion's share of the text, thus avoiding the sniggers of the small fry.

Precisely when did Saddam Hussein determine the destruction of the prohibited weapons which Hans Blix was sent to find?

'We now know', says Blix, 'that while the armed operation in Iraq was successful, the main diagnosis suggesting the operation – existence of weapons of mass destruction – appears to have been wrong. It was like surgery intended to remove something malignant finding that the malignancy was not there. Moreover, the absence of prohibited items was most likely a result of the imposition of the regime of inspection, eradication and manufacturing by the UN supported by military pressure from the US and the UK.'

Small wonder that Blix subtitles this part of his narrative 'The mother of all misjudgement'. He asks why it was that Blair and Bush listened so little to the International Atomic Energy Agency, and why Mr. Cheney and Mr. Wolfowitz 'seemed to have had such disdain for the assessments and analyses of the IAEA'.

Blix documents serial shortcomings in the intelligence which sent him on what seems largely to have been a wild goose chase. In fact there was a whole flock of wild geese. John Prados, by contrast, stayed at home and analysed, with great care, the documents which show 'how Bush sold us a war'.

'The drum beat of Bush administration published commentary had been uniformly negative. Washington wanted, or at least said it wanted, more inspections, faster inspections, more comprehensive inspections, at a time when the UNMOVIC group in Iraq had only recently arrived, was still getting up to speed, and had just over a week of visits under its belt. The Americans were making all kinds of confident assertions on what Iraq's weapons of mass destruction were. Hans Blix wanted to find them. Blix had received US intelligence briefings before, but all had a general level. He wanted the real skinny-hard data on targets his inspectors could go out and find.'

Resolution 1441 obliged Washington to provide this information, but the Americans were angry when it was requested. Prados remorselessly probes this modesty, reproducing successive documents, and carefully taking them to pieces. He examines, in turn, the Iraqi nuclear programme; unmanned aerial vehicles; allegations about the importation of yellow cake from Niger: and, in depth, the allegations about Saddam's proximity to al Qaeda and responsibility for 9/11.

In truth, it appears from this study that it really makes no difference whether Saddam Hussein did or did not harbour nuclear weapons, or chemical and biological warfare programmes. Neither does it really matter what precise relations Saddam Hussein may have had (or not) with Osama bin Laden. It is quite evident that the American Government itself had closer relations, and bears a heavier weight of responsibility for nurturing bin Laden: but be that as it may, President Bush had resolved upon his war long before the events described in these books took place. These investigations were all part of the choreography, which could not influence the course of events.

It is good to have these detailed accounts from key participants: when will the prehistory of these shocking manoeuvres be fully revealed?

*Rosemary Thomas*

## **Raspberry Voluntary**

**John Kampfner, *Blair's Wars*, The Free Press, 2004, 416 pages, paperback ISBN 0 7432 4830 9, £7.99**

The paperback edition of *Blair's Wars*, John Kampfner's aptly titled book, concludes: 'These were not his government's wars, least of all his party's wars. These were Blair's wars.' Kampfner musters a powerful case. Our reviewer of the original hardback edition commented that he 'has written what is perhaps the most important book on the outcome of New Labour, in all the years since 1997'.

For the new edition, Kampfner has added a section entitled 'Damaged Warrior', which includes 'elements of Hutton' (the inquiry into the death of the former weapons' inspector Dr David Kelly), and in which the author 'hopes to have shed new light on the workings of Blair's entourage, from the government's battles with the BBC, to the elusive search for weapons of mass destruction and the tensions this brought to relations with the US, to the legal advice of the Attorney General.'

On Hutton, Kampfner highlights 'the observation by [Jonathan] Powell that the dossier was "a bit of a problem" because it included "nothing to demonstrate a threat, let alone an imminent threat from Saddam' unless Iraq was attacked".' John Morrison, a career intelligence analyst in the Ministry of Defence, put the issue in a sharp perspective when he recently told the BBC's *Panorama* programme that, in response to the Prime Minister's assertion that 'the threat [from Iraq's WMD] is current and serious', that he 'could almost hear the collective raspberry going up round Whitehall'. For his trouble, Mr Morrison was duly sacked from his post as 'investigator' for the Intelligence and Security Committee at Westminster, which oversees Britain's intelligence services. Vindictiveness, it seems, goes together with Blair's innate belligerence.

It is much to be hoped that John Morrison, the valiant Brian Jones, formerly of the Defence Intelligence Staff and author of the memo which provided written testimony of the grave doubts about the claims made for Iraq's chemical weapons capability in Blair's infamous September Dossier, and, indeed, John Kampfner and others will continue to probe and make public the goings-on as Blair railroaded Britain into war on Iraq. Certainly, Lord Butler's report has thrown up many further questions. What, for instance, were Operation Rockingham's actual conclusions in relation to the Iraqi Declaration about its weapons of mass destruction? This was the 12,000 page report that Iraq submitted to the United Nations on 7 December 2002, in accordance with resolution 1441, which Jack Straw subsequently described in *The Times* (5 February 2003) as 'neither full, accurate, nor complete'. What was omitted, if there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq? Butler tells us that Operation Rockingham 'acted as the focus for the work tasked by the

Joint Intelligence Committee on the analysis of the declaration' (p.90). (For an extended discussion of the fate of the Iraqi declaration see *Empire No More!* pp187-199 by Ken Coates, Spokesman Books, 2004). And what was Dr Kelly's role in relation to all this? Surely, we haven't yet had the full story.

Kampfner also proves a rich source of New Labour gossip. He chronicles the twists and turns of New Labour's big falling-out with the BBC, over Andrew Gilligan's story about Blair's manipulation of the September dossier, with Peter Mandelson as master of ceremonies:

'The polarised views about the Gilligan story were sharpened by the intensity of the personal relationships. By this point Peter Mandelson had re-emerged as a key player at Blair's side. They all went back such a long way – Mandelson had been a lodger at the home of [Gavyn] Davies and his wife, Sue Nye, who runs Gordon Brown's office. [Greg] Dyke and Davies had been prominent Labour supporters. It was Davies and Nye who brought Mandelson and Brown together at their home in 1999 in an attempt to broker a ceasefire. This time, through another BBC-New Labour connection, it was Mandelson's turn to try to fix a deal. Two days before an emergency meeting of the corporation's governors, Mandelson phoned Caroline Thomson, the BBC's head of policy (who is married to Roger Liddle, an ally of Mandelson and long-time aid to Blair on Europe), suggesting a compromise – if the BBC said the story was wrong, the government would say it was a legitimate mistake and that the *Today* programme had been within its rights to broadcast it. Tessa Jowell, the Culture Secretary, urged them to accept the deal. Dyke and Davies pondered it, and rejected it... Over the next few weeks the row not just with [Alastair] Campbell but also with Mandelson intensified. Mandelson suggested to Davies that he was "too weak" to control Dyke. When Davies said it was not a case of weakness, but that he stood by the original story, Mandelson said he was only doing so because he was "a Brownite". He was, Mandelson said, "doing Brown's conspiracies to bring Tony Blair into disrepute..."'

This is a surely a story to which we will have to return. Certainly, the removal of Greg Dyke as Director General of the BBC ushered in the baleful era of Mark Byford, Geoff Hoon's old friend from Leeds University, as stop-gap. BBC Radio News programmes became completely un-listenable, as dumbing down plumbed unfathomable depths. The broadcast world, for a few weeks, was made fit for Mandelson's ear. Meanwhile, Iraq was imploding, although you had to go to Al Jazeera and Robert Fisk in *The Independent* to find out about it.

The autumn promises Greg Dyke's account of these events, which is likely to deliver a fanfare of raspberries. It all helps to bring closer the 'blairectomy'.

*Tony Simpson*

### **...Liars can figure**

**Christina Beatty and Stephen Fothergill, *The Diversion from 'Unemployment' to 'Sickness' across British Regions and Districts*, Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University**

We don't have a problem with unemployment in Britain anymore, do we? According to government ministers supported by most economic pundits and

financial journalists the problem is at worst only marginal. Such difficulties that remain can be resolved by better inducements for people to look for work, and heavier penalties for those who fail to do so.

For those who follow what has become the conventional wisdom that there is a suitable job for everybody who wants one, this new study is bound to be an eye-opener. The authors look beyond the comforting statistics of the static or declining monthly claimant count and delve into the reality of hidden unemployment. They arrive at the startling conclusion that more than a million men and women are jobless without being recorded in the official statistics. They conclude that the true figure of unemployment is more than double the official count.

The difficulty in measuring the true extent of those who are out of work lies in changes to the benefit system. Before 1981, the total of those claiming unemployment benefit could be taken as a reasonably accurate measure of those who were out of work. But a series of over 30 changes were introduced by successive Conservative governments, designed to make it more difficult for people to claim benefits, while at the same time helping to disguise the true level of unemployment. Finally, in 1996, the Government substituted Job Seekers' Allowance for Unemployment Benefit. JSA is payable only to those who are deemed to be available and actively looking for work.

When New Labour came into power, in 1997, it did nothing to reverse these changes, but rather sought to tighten the application of restrictions on eligibility for benefit.

The removal of the payment of benefit by right to unemployed people has meant that anyone with a working spouse or a pension from a previous job is debarred or deterred from making a claim: they have to look elsewhere for help. In the absence of alternative work there was another possibility for those suffering from some illness or disability: they could apply for Incapacity Benefit which was not subject to the same restrictions as Job Seekers' Allowance.

Beatty and Fothergill identify what they describe as a 'truly astounding' rise in the numbers claiming Incapacity Benefit over two decades. In 1981, there were 570,000 drawing Invalidity Benefit, as it was then known. By 2003, those on Incapacity Benefit and Severe Disablement Allowance, the successors to the original benefit, had risen incredibly to 2.7 million people! Our two researchers argue convincingly that such a huge increase can hardly be attributed to a general deterioration in the health of the British workforce.

Building on previous studies of their own and of other researchers into the labour market in the coalfields and elsewhere, Beatty and Fothergill are able to demonstrate that large-scale closures and the shrinkage of local employment opportunities do not necessarily or commonly result in higher recorded unemployment. The figures which do show large rises in these areas are those recorded for 'permanent sickness'.

It must be significant that the highest concentrations of people claiming Incapacity Benefit are to be found in the old industrial areas of the country. Half of the top 20 districts in the league table of sickness benefit claimants are former

coalmining areas. In marked contrast, the bottom 10 areas in the same table are small town or rural districts in South-East England. Of the 68 districts with 10 per cent of the population out of work and claiming sickness related benefits, not one was in London, the South-East, South-West or Eastern England. Only 3 or 4 per cent of those of working age are sickness claimants in these areas, where jobs are relatively easy to come by.

Using as a benchmark the official sickness figure for the fully employed parts of the South and applying it to other areas where jobs are more scarce, Beatty and Fothergill assess that, nationally, a total of 1,130,000 people have been 'diverted' from unemployment to sickness benefits. They chart these diversions region by region. The highest figures in the table are for Scotland, Wales and Northern England, followed by the West and East Midlands. They are able to confirm the validity of their calculations by cross-checking with 1981 sickness levels in the various areas and with the proportion of Incapacity Benefit claimants who say they would like full-time jobs.

The authors of this study emphasise that there is nothing fraudulent about the conduct of those who claim Incapacity Benefit. Claimants have to be medically examined and certified either by their own doctors or, increasingly, those employed by the Benefits Agency. But this does not necessarily mean they are incapable of any kind of work. It is simply that, where jobs are short, they are likely to find themselves at the end of a very long queue behind fitter and younger people.

The study concludes that the regional imbalances in the labour market are far more severe than is generally recognised. It is no good relying on the hope that this is a problem which will gradually disappear as those on Incapacity Benefit reach retirement age and move over to state pension provision. Unless this problem is recognised and tackled vigorously there will be no jobs for the young people growing up in these deprived areas. The dismal consequences of neglect are already to be witnessed in some of the old mining communities where lethargy, lawlessness and drugs are all too prevalent.

Beatty and Fothergill conclude with a plea for an effective regional economic policy which will multiply jobs in the places where they are needed. But New Labour believes fervently that the market is capable of producing solutions to all problems and eschews public intervention in the economy as likely to be ineffective or even harmful. Can even as powerful a case as has been presented here bring about a change of heart and mind?

*Ken Fleet*

## Hope for Africa?

**Basil Davidson, *The African Genius*, James Currey & Ohio University Press, 367 pages, paperback ISBN 085255799X £15.95**

In the midst of African disasters in the Sudan, in Ethiopia and Côte d'Ivoire, and after those in Algeria, Ruanda and Sierra Leone, it was a bold act of James

Currey and the University of Ohio to think of republishing Basil Davidson's *The Africans*, and doing so under the new title of *The African Genius*. Davidson's *The Africans* appeared as a great work of historical scholarship in the 1960s, and can be said to have inspired a whole series of local and regional African studies that followed. For almost the first time since the African continent was divided up into fifty or more colonies of the European powers, taking no account of ethnic and language groupings, the history of the African peoples which Europeans had for long sought to deny, emerged, thanks to Davidson's studies, into the daylight of common knowledge. The profundity of that earlier ignorance appeared in the belief, continuing into the 1960s, that the walls of Great Zimbabwe must have been built by the Portuguese or, earlier, by the Phoenicians, or even the Queen of Sheba, anything but the possibility of black people.

What *The Africans* revealed was the extraordinary success of hundreds, even thousands, of different peoples in turning an inhospitable continent of deserts, savannah and tropical jungle into a home to live in and bring up new generations – from 2 or 3 million population at the beginning of the millennium to 150 million by the colonial period, and this despite the loss of some 12 million young men and women in the slave trade. Davidson's studies of a wide range of African peoples from many parts of the continent reveal common themes – of establishing a balance with nature and a moral order among communities. Nowhere in other civilisations has Aristotle's warning against excess and advocacy of moderation in all things been so carefully and so necessarily adhered to. African history saw the rise of kings and empires and the outbreak of wars and violence, but there were built-in social and moral resistances to these becoming self-destructive – until today.

Davidson's studies end with a note on the African resistance movements to colonial rule, and his own participation in that resistance, and with a word of warning about the future. Colonial rule destroyed much of the deep strength of African society, just as industrialisation had done in European society, but it had not supplied anything capable of replacing what was destroyed. The nation state, as Davidson makes clear in a later book, was the 'black man's burden' – 53 statelets in all Africa, some of less than a million people, providing the basis for the wealth and power of small élites dependent on the European trade for rewarding the clienteles that served them, at the expense of the mass of the working population. It was a terrible inheritance made worse by the declining importance today of Africa's staple products, except for oil. Famines have become endemic and violence has followed. Davidson's conclusion was, however, an optimistic one for the future. Africans have succeeded in adapting to change many times before. They can do it again, but they should be left alone and not have other patterns of civilisation imposed upon them. But that was forty years ago, and the epidemic of AIDS combined with increasing militarisation, as the Great Powers once again scramble to control Africa's resources, suggest a less hopeful outlook today.

*Michael Barratt Brown*