

Dreamers and idiots

Britain and the US did everything to avoid a peaceful solution in Iraq and Afghanistan

Those who would take us to war must first shut down the public imagination. They must convince us that there is no other means of preventing invasion, or conquering terrorism, or even defending human rights. When information is scarce, imagination is easy to control. As intelligence gathering and diplomacy are conducted in secret, we seldom discover - until it is too late - how plausible the alternatives may be.

So those of us who called for peace before the wars with Iraq and Afghanistan were mocked as effeminate dreamers. The intelligence our governments released suggested that Saddam Hussein and the Taliban were immune to diplomacy or negotiation. Faced with such enemies, what would we do, the hawks asked? And our responses felt timid beside the clanking rigours of war. To the columnist David Aaronovitch, we were “indulging... in a cosmic whinge”. To the Daily Telegraph, we had become “Osama bin Laden’s useful idiots”.

Had the options been as limited as the western warlords and their bards suggested, this might have been true. But, as many of us suspected at the time, we were lied to. Most of the lies are now familiar: there appear to have been no weapons of mass destruction and no evidence to suggest that, as President Bush claimed in March, Saddam had “trained and financed... al-Qaida”. Bush and Blair, as their courtship of the president of Uzbekistan reveals, appear to possess no genuine concern for the human rights of foreigners.

But a further, and even graver, set of lies is only now beginning to come to light. Even

if all the claims Bush and Blair made about their enemies and their motives had been true, and all their objectives had been legal and just, there may still have been no need to go to war. For, as we discovered last week, Saddam proposed to give Bush and Blair almost everything they wanted before a shot had been fired. Our governments appear both to have withheld this information from the public and to have lied to us about the possibilities for diplomacy.

Over the four months before the coalition forces invaded Iraq, Saddam's government made a series of increasingly desperate offers to the United States. In December, the Iraqi intelligence services approached Vincent Cannistraro, the CIA's former head of counter-terrorism, with an offer to prove that Iraq was not linked to the September 11 attacks, and to permit several thousand US troops to enter the country to look for weapons of mass destruction. If the object was regime change, then Saddam, the agents claimed, was prepared to submit himself to internationally monitored elections within two years. According to Mr Cannistraro, these proposals reached the White House, but were "turned down by the president and vice-president".

By February, Saddam's negotiators were offering almost everything the US government could wish for: free access to the FBI to look for weapons of mass destruction wherever it wanted, support for the US position on Israel and Palestine, even rights over Iraq's oil. Among the people they contacted was Richard Perle, the security adviser who for years had been urging a war with Iraq. He passed their offers to the CIA. Last week he told the New York Times that the CIA had replied: "Tell them that we will see them in Baghdad".

Saddam Hussein, in other words, appears to have done everything possible to find a diplomatic alternative to the impending war, and the US government appears to have done everything necessary to prevent one. This is the opposite to what we were told by George Bush and Tony Blair. On March 6, 13 days before the war began, Bush said to journalists: "I want to remind you that it's his choice to make as to whether or not we go to war. It's Saddam's choice. He's the person that can make the choice of war and peace. Thus far, he's made the wrong choice."

Ten days later, Blair told a press conference: "We have provided the right diplomatic way through this, which is to lay down a clear ultimatum to Saddam: cooperate or face disarmament by force... all the way through we have tried to provide a diplomatic solution." On March 17, Bush claimed that "should Saddam Hussein choose confrontation, the American people can know that every measure has been taken to avoid war". All these statements are false.

The same thing happened before the war with Afghanistan. On September 20 2001, the Taliban offered to hand Osama bin Laden to a neutral Islamic country for trial if

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the US presented them with evidence that he was responsible for the attacks on New York and Washington. The US rejected the offer. On October 1, six days before the bombing began, they repeated it, and their representative in Pakistan told reporters: “We are ready for negotiations. It is up to the other side to agree or not. Only negotiation will solve our problems.” Bush was asked about this offer at a press conference the following day. He replied: “There’s no negotiations. There’s no calendar. We’ll act on [sic] our time.”

On the same day, Tony Blair, in his speech to the Labour party conference, ridiculed the idea that we could “look for a diplomatic solution”. “There is no diplomacy with Bin Laden or the Taliban regime... I say to the Taliban: surrender the terrorists; or surrender power. It’s your choice.” Well, they had just tried to exercise that choice, but George Bush had rejected it.

Of course, neither Bush nor Blair had any reason to trust the Taliban or Saddam - these people were, after all, negotiating under duress. But neither did they have any need to trust them. In both cases they could have presented their opponents with a deadline for meeting the concessions they had offered. Nor could the allies argue that the offers were not worth considering because they were inadequate: both the Taliban and Saddam were attempting to open negotiations, not to close them - there appeared to be plenty of scope for bargaining. In other words, peaceful resolutions were rejected before they were attempted. What this means is that even if all the other legal tests for these wars had been met (they had not), both would still have been waged in defiance of international law. The charter of the United Nations specifies that “the parties to any dispute...shall, first of all, seek a solution by negotiation”.

None of this matters to the enthusiasts for war. That these conflicts were unjust and illegal, that they killed or maimed tens of thousands of civilians, is irrelevant, as long as their aims were met. So the hawks should ponder this. Had a peaceful resolution of these disputes been attempted, Bin Laden might now be in custody, Iraq might be a pliant and largely peaceful nation finding its own way to democracy, and the prevailing sentiment within the Muslim world might be sympathy for the United States, rather than anger and resentment.

Now who are the dreamers and the useful idiots, and who the pragmatists? #