

War on the BBC

By Greg Palast

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He did not say, “hello,” or even his name, just left a one-word message: “Whitewash.” It came from an embattled journalist whispering from inside the bowels of a television and radio station under siege, on a small island off the coast of Ireland: from BBC London. And another call, a colleague at the Guardian, said, “The future of British journalism is very bleak.”

However, the future for fake and farcical war propaganda is quite bright indeed. Today, Lord Hutton issued his report that followed an inquiry revealing the Blair government’s manipulation of intelligence to claim that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass murder threatening imminent attack on London.

Based on the Blair government’s claim, headlines pumped the war hysteria. “Saddam Could Have Nuclear Bomb In Year,” screeched the London Times; “Brits 45 Mins from Doom,” shrieked the Sun newspaper. Given these facts only a sissy pacifist, a lunatic or a Saddam fellow traveler would fail to see that Prime Minister “Winston” Blair had no choice but to re-conquer its former Mesopotamian colony.

But these headlines were, in fact, false, and deadly so. Unlike America’s press puppies, BBC reporters thought it their duty to check out these life-or-death claims. Reporters Andrew Gilligan and Susan Watts contacted a crucial source, Britain’s and the United Nation’s top weapons inspector. He told reporter Watts that the Weapons of Mass Destruction claims by Blair and our own President Bush were, “all spin.” Gilligan went further, reporting that this spin, this “sexed up” version of intelligence, was the result of interventions by Blair’s PR henchman, Alistair Campbell. Whatever reading of the source’s statements, it was clear that intelligence experts had deep misgivings about the strength of the evidence for war.

The source? Dr. David Kelly. To save itself after the reports by Gilligan and Watts, the government, including the Prime Minister himself, went on an internal crusade to out the name of its own intelligence operative, so it could then discredit the news items.

Publishing the name of an intelligence advisor is serious stuff. In the U.S., a special criminal prosecutor is now scouring the White House to find the person who publicly named a CIA agent. If found, the Bush-ite leaker faces jail time.

Blair’s government was not so crude as to give out Dr. Kelly’s name. Rather, they hit on a subterfuge of dropping clues then allowing reporters to play “20 questions” – if they

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guessed Kelly's name correctly, the government would confirm it. Only the thickest reporters (I name none here) failed after more than a couple tries.

Dr. Kelly, who had been proposed for knighthood was named, harangued and his career destroyed by the outing. He then took his own life.

But today is not a day of mourning at 10 Downing Street, rather a day of self-congratulation. There were no weapons of mass destruction, no nuclear warheads just short of completion, no "45 minutes to doom" bombs auguring a new London blitz. The exile group which supplied this raw claim now calls the 45 minute story, "a crock of shit."

Yet Blair's minions are proclaiming their vindication.

This is not just a story about what is happening "over there" in the United Kingdom. This we must remember: David Kelly was not only advisor to the British, but to the UN and, by extension, the expert for George W. Bush. Our commander-in-chief leaped to adopt the boogey man WMD stories from the Blair government when our own CIA was reticent.

So M'Lord Hutton has killed the messenger: the BBC. Should the reporter Gilligan have used more cautious terms? Some criticism is fair. But the extraordinary import of his and Watts' story is forgotten: Our two governments bent the information, then hunted down the questioners. And now the second invasion of the Iraq war proceeds: the conquest of the British Broadcasting Corporation. Until now, this quasi-governmental outlet has refused to play Izvestia to any prime minister, Labour or Tory. As of today, the independence of one of the most independent major networks on the planet is under attack. Blair's government is "cleared" and now arrogantly sport their kill, the head of Gavyn Davies, BBC chief who resigned today.

"The bleak future for British journalism" portends darkness for journalists everywhere – the threat to the last great open platform for hard investigative reporting. And frankly, it's a worrisome day for me. I'm not a disinterested by-stander. My most important investigations, all but banned from U.S. airwaves, were developed and broadcast by BBC Newsnight, the program where Watts works.

Will an iron curtain descend on the news? Before dawn today, I was reading Churchill's words to the French command in the hours before as the Panzers breached the defenses of Paris. Churchill told those preparing to surrender, "Whatever you may do, we shall fight on forever and ever and ever." This may yet be British journalism's Finest Hour.

Greg Palast is the author of the New York Times bestseller, The Best Democracy Money Can Buy. His reports for BBC Newsnight and The Guardian papers and other writings may be viewed at his website.