

# Bush and Blair: Secrets and lies

**By Neil Mackay**

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**T**ony Blair's secrets are out, and this is what he knew a full year before the invasion of Iraq: the war was illegal, it would turn into a quagmire that could last for generations and it was more than likely that, once Saddam was overthrown, a new Iraqi government, even a democratic one, would start developing weapons of mass destruction.

These warnings were contained in a series of top-secret documents that Blair read and digested long before the invasion. It's little wonder that Menzies Campbell, the Liberal Democrat foreign affairs spokesman, says these revelations are 'the crown jewels'.

The documents show that, despite the reservations of his own foreign secretary and the Cabinet Office Overseas and Defence Secretariat, Blair was swept along by George W Bush into a war that the British people did not want. His motive? The preservation of the transatlantic special relationship. America, under Bush, was going to take out Saddam no matter what happened – and the White House clearly expected its loyal ally the UK to follow in step behind the US.

On Monday, Blair began his week by trying to draw a line under Iraq. At the Trades Union Conference in Brighton, he attempted to put Iraq on the back burner by talking up his domestic agenda. His choice of words couldn't have been more ironic: "Even if I've never been away, it's time to show I'm back". He could have been talking about the spectre of Iraq hanging over his career and British politics: Iraq has never been away, but today it's back with a vengeance.

The contents of the documents couldn't have been revealed at a worse time for Blair. Last week, Kofi Annan said the invasion of the Iraq was 'illegal'. The forthcoming report by the Iraq Survey Group, which has been hunting for WMD in Iraq, will say Saddam had no stockpiles of banned weapons.

President Bush, yesterday, warned that guerrilla attacks in Iraq will probably get worse, and a highly classified US National Intelligence Estimate, put together this summer by the government's most senior analysts, says Iraq could spiral into full-blown civil war. The

## **Bush and Blair: secrets and lies / 2**

Foreign Relations Committee in the US is also furious at a request from the State Department to divert some £2.82 billion out of reconstruction funds, worth £15bn, to security and economic development, such as the improvement of the oil industry.

The claims in the secret documents are yet another nail in the coffin for a Prime Minister who is fixated on his place in the history books. They show that he was not motivated by passion or commitment but by a carefully calculated mix of electoral self-interest and loyalty to America.

The secret documents show that, a full year before the invasion, Blair was told that any hope of getting a stable government for post-invasion Iraq would take 'many years' and would be impossible without putting thousands of British troops into the country. Foreign Secretary Jack Straw also expressed grave reservations about the war. His officials told Blair that Iraq could 'revert to type' and start to build up stockpiles of anthrax, sarin and nuclear weapons. Blair was also warned that Bush considered taking out Saddam Hussein to be 'unfinished business' – a 'grudge match' – and that if Britain wanted to go to war legally against Iraq, Blair would have to 'wrongfoot' Saddam and get him to slip up over weapons inspections in order to give the UK an excuse for war.

Straw told Blair in March 2002, in a letter stamped 'Secret and Personal' that there was no proper understanding of what would happen in Iraq post-invasion. "There seems to be a larger hole in this than anything," he wrote. Referring to the American thirst for regime change, Straw added: "No-one has satisfactorily answered how there can be any certainty that the replacement regime will be any better. Iraq has no history of democracy so no-one has this habit or experience."

Straw was deeply worried about the legality of any invasion. He said British action had to be "narrated with reference to the international rule of law". Straw added that his legal advisers had told him it would take a new UN resolution to make the war legal. The US had no interest in these kinds of niceties.

In an options paper dated March 8, 2002, prepared by senior ministerial advisers and marked 'Secret UK Eyes Only', the Cabinet Office Overseas and Defence Secretariat spelled out just how depressing the interlocked futures of Iraq and Britain had become. It said that: "The greater investment of Western forces, the greater our control over Iraq's future, but the greater the cost and the longer we would need to stay".

It added: "The only certain means to remove Saddam and his elite is to invade and impose a new government, but this would involve nation-building over many years." Putting a 'Sunni strongman' in place in order to get British troops out of Iraq quickly would be completely counter-productive. "There would be a strong risk of the Iraqi system reverting to type. Military coup could succeed until an autocratic Sunni dictator

## **Bush and Blair: secrets and lies / 3**

emerged who protected Sunni interests. With time he could acquire WMD,” the paper added.

Even a democratic government would be likely to try to acquire WMD for two reasons: firstly, because of the nuclear capabilities of its two enemy states – Israel and Iran – and secondly, because the Palestine question was the unresolved source of conflict in the Middle East.

If a democratic government was to survive in Iraq, “it would require the US and others to commit to nation-building for many years. This would entail a substantial international security force.”

Lord Butler, who oversaw the inquiry into the use of intelligence to make the case for war, referred to the Cabinet Office options paper in his report, saying it indicated that regime change was illegal and had ‘no basis in international law’. The policy paper said there were serious difficulties in finding a legal justification for war, adding: ‘Subject to law officers’ advice, none currently exists’.

Not only that, but the paper also said Saddam was not an increased risk and that there was no evidence Saddam was backing international terror. “This makes moving to invade legally very difficult,” the options paper concluded.

The US believed a legal basis for war already existed, because of Saddam’s flouting of UN resolutions on disarmament, and was dead set against continuing a policy of containment. “The swift success of the war in Afghanistan, distrust of UN sanctions and inspections regimes, and unfinished business from 1991 are all factors,” the document said.

Washington, the paper warned, would not be “governed by wider political factors. The US may be willing to work with a much smaller coalition than we think desirable”. Peter Ricketts, Foreign Office policy director, said there were ‘real problems’ with the US policy line.

“Even the best survey of Iraq’s WMD programmes will not show much advance in recent years,” Ricketts wrote. “Military operations need clear and compelling military objectives. For Iraq, ‘regime change’ does not stack up. It sounds like a grudge match between Bush and Saddam.”

Ricketts, however, advised that Blair should stick close to Bush: “By sharing Bush’s broad objective, the Prime Minister can help shape how it is defined, and the approach to achieving it. In the process, he can bring home to Bush some of the realities which will be less evident from Washington. He can help Bush by telling him things his own machine probably isn’t.” Ricketts also explained why the war was an inevitability. “The truth is that what has changed is not the pace of Saddam Hussein’s WMD programmes, but our tolerance of them post-September 11.”

## **Bush and Blair: secrets and lies / 4**

At the same time, MI6 was arguing against Blair's decision to publish a dossier of declassified information designed to convince the British public that Saddam was dangerous. MI6 was saying that the intelligence didn't support the claims that Blair wanted to make. Jack Straw felt the dossier would be meaningless.

A Joint Intelligence Committee assessment dated March 15, said intelligence on Saddam's WMD was 'patchy'. The toughest the language could get was: "We believe Iraq retains some production equipment and some small stocks of chemical precursors, and may have hidden small quantities of agents and weapons. There is no intelligence on any biological agent production facilities."

Blair was advised in the Cabinet Office options paper to work slowly towards a legal justification for war, by building international support and ramping up the pressure on Saddam by pushing for weapons inspectors to return to Iraq.

The chance to wrongfoot Saddam could come from him refusing to re-admit the inspectors or blocking their inspections. "He has miscalculated before," the paper says. Other documents show that the Foreign Office and the Bush administration were poles apart in terms of how they saw the conflict unfolding. The Foreign Office was alarmed at just how eager the US was to hit Iraq, whether or not it had the support of its allies.

In a letter to the Prime Minister marked 'Secret – Strictly Personal', Sir David Manning, Blair's foreign policy adviser, summed up the talks he had in Washington in March 2002, saying: "I think there is a real risk that the administration underestimates the difficulties. They may agree that failure isn't an option, but this does not mean they will necessarily avoid it."

Bush "still has to find answers to the big questions", Manning wrote, including a solution to the most vital problem: "What happens on the morning after"?

The Americans were fully aware of the invidious position in which Blair found himself. He was being dragged two ways at the same time: the US expected the UK, its closest ally, to get onboard for a war in Iraq, but more than half the British people were polled as opposed to the war.

Manning had briefed Sir Christopher Meyer, the then British ambassador to the US, and had spoken to US National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice. Manning told her that Blair wanted Bush not to rush into war until the invasion was deemed legal – something that would need the full support of the UN Security Council. A memo from Meyer was circulated which warned UK policy not to underestimate Bush's passion for ousting Saddam. With Washington pushing for war with Iraq in the autumn of 2002, Blair's advisers told him that: "if any invasion is contemplated this autumn, then a decision will need to be taken in principle six months in advance?. That left Blair little or no time to make the case

## **Bush and Blair: secrets and lies / 5**

for war legally watertight.

Manning was dispatched to Washington to explain to the administration just how difficult life was for Blair. Manning's memo on the trip read: "Prime Minister, I had dinner with Condi [Condoleezza Rice] on Tuesday – these were good exchanges, and particularly frank when we were one-on-one at dinner. We spent a long time at dinner on Iraq. It is clear that Bush is grateful for your support and has registered that you are getting flak.

"I said that you would not budge in your support for regime change but you had to manage a press, a parliament and a public opinion that was very different than anything in the States. And you would not budge on your insistence that, if we pursued regime change, it must be very carefully done and produce the right result. Failure was not an option. Condi's enthusiasm for regime change is undimmed. But there were some signs, since we last spoke, of greater awareness of the practical difficulties and political risks.

"From what she said, Bush has yet to find the answers to the big questions: how to persuade international opinion that military action against Iraq is necessary and justified; what value to put on the exiled Iraqi opposition; how to co-ordinate a US/allied military campaign with internal opposition (assuming there is any any); what happens on the morning after? Bush will want to pick your brains. He will also want to hear whether he can expect coalition support. I told Condi that we realised that the administration could go it alone if it chose. But if it wanted company, it would have to take account of the concerns of its potential coalition partners."

Manning told Rice that pushing for weapons inspections could help bring Europe along, adding: "Renewed refusal by Saddam to accept unfettered inspections would be a powerful argument." Manning also told Rice that it was 'paramount' that Israel and Palestine be dealt with. Failure to do so could lead to the allies 'bombing Iraq and losing the Gulf'.

Manning told Blair: "Bush wants to hear your views on Iraq before taking a decision. He also wants your support. He is still smarting from the comments by other European leaders on his Iraq policy. This gives you real influence: on the public relations strategy; on the UN and weapons inspections; and on US planning for a military campaign. This could be critically important. I think there is a real risk that the administration underestimates the difficulties. They may agree that failure isn't an option, but this does not mean that they will avoid it."

Manning added that the "US scrambling to establish a link between Iraq and al-Qaeda is so far unconvincing. To get public and parliamentary support for military options we have to be convincing that the threat is so serious/imminent that it is worth sending our troops to die for".

Blair travelled to Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas, in March 2002 to talk war with the President. Here was how Jack Straw interpreted the meeting: "The rewards from your visit to Crawford will be few. The risks are high both for you and the government." Straw said there was a long way to go before parliament could be convinced about "the scale of the

## **Bush and Blair: secrets and lies / 6**

threat from Iraq and why this has got worse recently; what distinguishes the Iraqi threat from that of for example Iran and North Korea so as to justify military action; military action in terms of international law; and whether the consequences of military action really would be a compliant, law-abiding replacement government.”

Straw added: “I know there are those who say that an attack on Iraq would be justified whether or not weapons inspectors were re-admitted, but I believe that a demand for the unfettered re-admission of weapons inspectors is essential, in terms of public explanation, and in terms of legal sanction for military action.”

Straw said there were ‘two potential elephant traps’: firstly, wanting regime change did not justify military action; and secondly, US opposition to a ‘fresh mandate?’ Straw added that: “The weight of legal advice here is that a fresh mandate may well be required.”

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*Neil Mackay is Investigations Editor of the Sunday Herald, Scotland’s leading quality Sunday newspaper.*