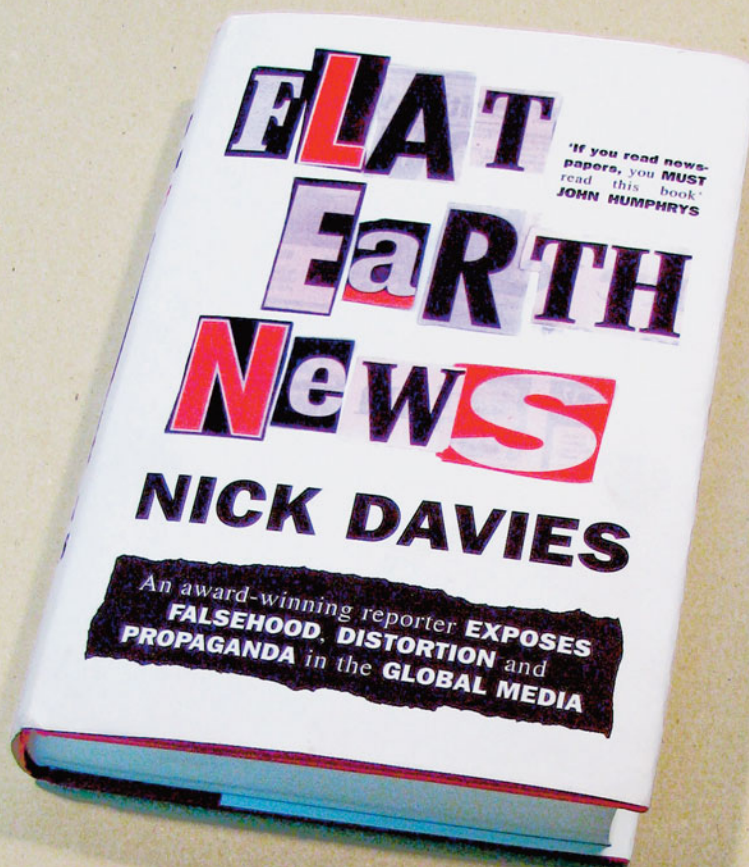


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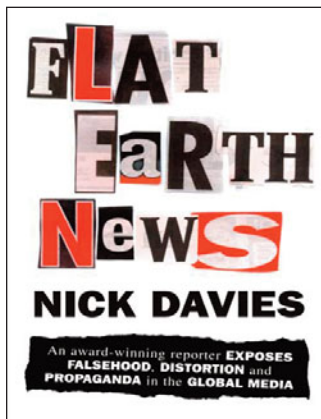
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THE BLINDED OBSERVER

How Downing Street and the intelligence services manipulated Britain's leading liberal Sunday newspaper into supporting Bush's war on Iraq

A 24-PAGE EXCERPT FROM **FLAT EARTH NEWS** BY NICK DAVIES



Flat Earth News

Nick Davies

Published by Chatto & Windus, London
Price £17.99

When award-winning – journalist Nick Davies investigated his own profession, he found an industry in crisis – undermined by commercialism to the point where most reporters are no longer able to go out and find stories or to make contacts or even to check the facts which they recycle. Working with specialist researchers from the University of Cardiff. Davies traced the source of thousands of news stories and found they consisted overwhelmingly of unchecked second-hand material from wire agencies and from PR. He went on to expose the sophisticated new techniques of the PR industry and of a new machinery of propaganda, both of which are now manufacturing pseudo-news on a huge scale.

He developed dozens of sources in Fleet Street newsrooms and broadcasting outlets and uncovered the story of the prestigious Sunday newspaper which allowed the CIA and MI6 to plant fiction in its columns; the newsroom which routinely rejects stories about black people, the respected paper that hired a professional fraudster to set up a front company to entrap senior political figures; the newspapers which support law and order while paying cash bribes to bent detectives. Davies shows the impact of a corrupted news media on a world where consumers believe a mass of stories as false as the idea that the Earth is flat – from the millennium bug to the WMD in Iraq – and presents a new model for understanding news.

This excerpt is Chapter 9 – The Blinded Observer.

ColdType

WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD
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THE BLINDED OBSERVER

By NICK DAVIS

(An excerpt from his book, **Flat Earth News**)

A funny thing happened to the *Observer's* US correspondent, Ed Vulliamy, in the autumn of 2002. It started when he came up with a new contact – a former senior analyst in the Central Intelligence Agency named Mel Goodman. This was an interesting contact for two reasons. First, although Goodman had left the agency, he had kept his security clearance and had stayed in touch with his former colleagues and was able to get access to highly classified documents. Second, he had a big story: through these contacts, he knew that, contrary to everything that was being said by the American and British governments, the CIA were reporting that Saddam Hussein had no weapons of mass destruction.

Looking back at it now, that seems almost like a cliché, but in 2002 it was highly important. Only a handful of journalists had run stories to challenge the global Flat Earth reporting about Iraqi weapons; and those few dissenting stories were weakened by the fact that they were based on comments from unidentified officials. Goodman not only had the story direct

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from the CIA, he was willing to go on the record as a named source.

Vulliamy filed it all and waited for the impact which it was bound to have on the global debate about the impending war. The funny thing was that the *Observer* did not print it.

Over the following four months, as the cries for war became louder, Vulliamy filed it again. In total, he filed versions of Mel Goodman's revelations on seven different occasions. The *Observer*, however, did not print any of them.

A surviving copy of the seventh version, filed two weeks before the invasion in March 2003, reveals that it exposed much of what the world learned only slowly in the months and years that followed.

There was the intro clearly revealing 'assurances to the *Observer* by one veteran senior former CIA officer that Saddam Hussein possesses no weapons of mass destruction'.

There was the central charge of dishonesty: 'The official, talking to the *Observer* for some months now, accuses the Bush administration of "manipulating intelligence materials to make the case for war"

– manipulation by the White House, Pentagon and other politically-appointed masters whom the officer accuses of deliberately “cranking up” and “making fabricated additions to” the work of CIA analysts over the threat posed by Saddam Hussein, his links to al-Qaeda and his alleged weapons of mass destruction.’

And there was Goodman, on the record: ‘Speaking exclusively to the *Observer*, Melvyn Goodman was head of the CIA’s Soviet desk during much of the cold war. In an interview four months ago, Goodman charged the Bush administration with “basing the case for war against Iraq on a shoot-the-messenger syndrome, ignoring the assessments by CIA analysts which do not support the case for war, and instead establishing intelligence cadres made up of political appointees who Will tell the President what he wants to hear”.’

This version of the story ran to more than 1,500 words and went into considerable detail. It summarised the conclusion of CIA analysts that there was no evidence of the claimed link between Saddam and al-Qaeda; relayed their scepticism about claims of Iraqi weapons; revealed that neither the CIA’s ‘front-row analysts’ nor their colleagues in the State Department had any faith in the Iraqi National Congress, led by Ahmed Chalabi, whose information was still being taken seriously at this time; and named the political officials in the Pentagon and the State Department who were obstructing the flow of honest intelligence.

There were further powerful quotes from Goodman, the intelligence veteran: ‘The entire enterprise is back to front from an intelligence point of view. President Bush will use whatever information suits him, and if he isn’t getting it from the civil

All of this flew in the face of the consensus account of Iraq’s threat to the world and of its links with international terrorism. All of it subsequently proved to be true – when it was too late to influence the debate on the need for war. Why did the *Observer* not print it?

service, he arranges for people to give it to him. This leads to a cranking up of what the intelligence analysts actually find and to the politicisation of intelligence. It entails acute frustration among some of the best professional agents. You have to imagine what it is like for the analysts. You go to your political masters in the White House or Pentagon, and deliver what you know. They say: “We want this, not that. We want X, not X. Go and get me X”’

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Why did the *Observer* not print it?

SOMETHING important happened to the *Observer* in the build-up to the invasion of Iraq. The problem was not simply that they refused to print Mel Goodman’s revelations. There were other stories of a similar kind which also struggled to make it into print. And the rejection of those stories occurred while the paper was engaged in publishing a sequence of high-profile, high-volume falsehoods about the alleged threat from Iraq, some of which went far beyond false claims that were made in other media. As the deadline for invasion drew nearer, the paper declared its support for war.

This was a newspaper which historically had positioned itself on the left of centre and had taken some pride in its willingness to swim against the mainstream, to confront the power elite if that was what its principles demanded. Most famously, the *Observer* had stood out against the British invasion of Suez in 1956,

despite courting the scorn of the government and the loss of some of its more conservative readers and advertisers.

And yet this newspaper which had thrived on scepticism was seduced into accepting unproven and extravagant claims; this flagship of the left was towed along in the wake of a determinedly right-wing American government; on this crucial, long-running story, the essential role of journalism, to tell the truth, was compromised.

However shocking the *Observer's* coverage may have been to some of its readers and some of its reporters, there is an important sense in which it was not an aberration. While the paper may well have lost touch with its roots, its performance was a classic example of some of the great underlying weaknesses in modern journalism.

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TWO MONTHS after Islamist terrorists used four planes full of civilians as flying bombs in New York City, Washington DC and Pennsylvania, the *Observer* announced that the men responsible for this massacre were linked to the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein. This was a big story, billed as 'A Focus Special', 2,500 words long, spread across two pages, with a thick black headline. And it was wrong.

It was wrong in its headline claim of an 'Iraqi connection' to the attacks of 11 September 2001. It was wrong in its central statement that the Iraqi regime had used its intelligence officers to liaise with the hijackers, wrong to imply that the regime had trained them. It was wrong in much of its detail.

The story was written by one of the

In the months that followed his claims about the Iraqi connection, Rose produced a series of other stories containing claims which do not stand up to scrutiny

Observer's most experienced reporters, David Rose, a former crime reporter who had become a specialist in intelligence and terrorism. It was one of a sequence of high profile and sometimes aggressive stories which he wrote in the nineteen months between those infamous attacks and the subsequent invasion of Iraq. Many of these stories were, at best, unproven; at worst, simply wrong. Like the 'Iraqi connection' story, they provided powerful ammunition for those who believed that force should be used against Iraq.

On 14 October, a month before his 'Iraqi connection' story, Rose had already used the front page of the *Observer* to name Iraq as the CIA's prime suspect for the five letters containing anthrax which had been sent to targets in the US. This is a contention for which no evidence has ever been produced. Even at the height of their attempts to prove a link between Saddam Hussein and international terrorism, the British and American authorities never produced any evidence or intelligence to link the Iraqi regime to the anthrax attacks.

In the months that followed his claims about the Iraqi connection, Rose produced a series of other stories containing claims which do not stand up to scrutiny. Some of them were presented in the context of lacerating attacks on those who opposed the American position.

In a comment piece in December 2001, arguing for the use of military force against Saddam Hussein, Rose defended the Iraqi National Congress, which was then the vehicle for American political ambitions in Iraq, complaining that 'foreign policy Arabists have briefed the media that the INC is a disorganised, divided rabble'. He then declared:

'In fact, it is supported by the overwhelming majority of Iraq's liberals and intellectuals, and has become by far the best source of information on what is actually happening there.' The INC's leader, Ahmed Chalabi, subsequently returned to Iraq where he failed conspicuously to attract support from a majority of liberals or intellectuals or anybody else; and his INC was exposed as the source of a steady flow of disinformation in the build-up to the war.

In January 2002, Rose complained about 'inaccuracies and glib assertions' in the media and went on to endorse the views of Laurie Mylroie, an American academic who was claiming that Iraq was responsible not only for the attacks of 11 September 2001, but also for the first bombing of the New York World Trade Center in 1993, the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, the bombing of two US Embassies in East Africa in 1998 and even the crash of TWA flight 800 off the coast of Long Island in 1996. Mylroie's theories had been adopted and recycled by the neoconservatives in the Bush administration. An insight into her credibility is captured in *Against All Enemies*, the memoir of Richard Clarke, who advised four US presidents on counter-terrorism. Clarke describes a meeting in 2001 at which the then Deputy Secretary of Defense, Paul Wolfowitz, claimed that al-Qaeda must have had the support of a foreign government in its 1993 attack on the World Trade Center. He continues: 'I could hardly believe it, but Wolfowitz was spouting the Laurie Mylroie theory that Iraq was behind the 1993 truck bomb at the World Trade Center, a theory that had been investigated for years and found to be totally untrue.'

Later in 2002, Rose marked the anniver-

Later in 2002, Rose marked the anniversary of the 11 September attacks by assaulting the credibility of Scott Ritter, the former UN arms inspector who was warning that Saddam Hussein's regime possessed no weapons of mass destruction

sary of the 11 September attacks by assaulting the credibility of Scott Ritter, the former UN arms inspector who was warning that Saddam Hussein's regime possessed no weapons of mass destruction. As evidence against Ritter, Rose cited the testimony of an Iraqi defector named Adrian Saeed al-Haideri. The reality was that al-Haideri had failed a CIA lie detector test in December 2001, before his claims were fed to the world's media via the *New York Times*. After the war, when he was taken to Iraq by American intelligence, he was unable to find any of the weapons sites which he had claimed to know about. Scott Ritter's warnings turned out to be correct.

That same month, Rose reported as fact that Saddam Hussein had disposed of the husband of one of his mistresses by having the man thrown into prison and his assets seized. He also reported as fact that Saddam's son had raped this woman's fifteen-year-old daughter. He wrote: 'The *Observer* has seen evidence which corroborates her story, including copies of her passport and visa stamps, and photographs of one of her daughters with Saddam's son.' Clearly, this evidence did nothing to corroborate the key statements in the story. This woman, whose allegations were provided to the media by the Iraqi National Congress, subsequently claimed on US television that she had personally seen Osama bin Laden visiting Saddam, and that Saddam liked to drink alcohol and smoke cigars while watching videos of his enemies being tortured. Rose now accepts that elements of her story appear to have been propaganda.

On 16 March 2003 – a week before the invasion – Rose reported that an alleged Spanish terrorist, Yusuf Galan, who had

been accused of helping the 11 September conspirators, was said to have ‘links with Iraqi officials’, specifically that he had once been invited to a party by the Iraqi ambassador in Spain. Galan was eventually convicted and jailed for six years as a minor member of a terrorist organisation and not as a party to the 11 September conspiracy. Whatever was originally claimed by Spanish investigators, no evidence was ever produced to show that he had any connection of any kind with any Iraqi official, or that he had been invited to an Iraqi Embassy party, or that he had gone to the party (or that attending such a party would have been evidence of Iraqi involvement in his plans for terrorism).

Why? Why would such an able and experienced reporter produce so many stories which were not only factually wrong but which carried the flag for a policy which appeared to contradict so many of the principles which guided his newspaper?

A year after the war, in May 2004, Rose confessed in the *Evening Standard* that his enthusiasm for the invasion had been ‘misplaced and naive’. ‘I look back with shame and disbelief,’ he said. Three weeks later, in the immediate aftermath of the *New York Times* publishing an account of its own failure to report the reality of the case for war against Iraq, Rose wrote a short and limited retraction of his work in the *Observer*, in which he acknowledged that he had become part of ‘a calculated set-up, devised to foster the propaganda case for war’.

But why? A glimpse of the answer was captured by Rose in his *Observer* retraction. He had, he said, been ‘bamboozled’.

Reporters do not have to be dishonest to be wrong. They do not have to be the

Why would such an able and experienced reporter produce so many stories which were not only factually wrong but which carried the flag for a policy which appeared to contradict so many of the principles which guided his newspaper?

hirelings of governments or intelligence agencies to become the vehicles for their disinformation. They simply need to be vulnerable to manipulation.

In his sequence of stories, Rose relied on two different kinds of sources of information: defectors provided by the Iraqi National Congress; and officials of intelligence agencies, particularly the American CIA and the British MI6. Both led him astray.

After the war, it became notorious that the INCs collection of defectors had misled reporters, most notably some of those working for the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Rose relied on the claims of five of these defectors. One, who spoke to him on condition of anonymity told the truth, he believes. But this man did not contribute to any of his *Observer* stories. Two others – Mohammed Harith and Adnan Saeed al-Haideri he now accepts, were liars – and had been recognised as liars by American intelligence before they were fed to the media by the INC. He now has doubts as to whether they were even genuine defectors.

The other two – Sabah Khodada and a man known as ‘Abu Zeinab’ – provided core information for Rose’s ‘Iraqi connection’ story in November 2001, claiming that Saddam Hussein had been training Islamist terrorists at a camp called Salman Pak, and suggesting that the hijackers on 11 September had used techniques which were taught there. Rose still believes there is evidence that Saddam Hussein was training Islamic militants but acknowledges that there is no evidence that this was aimed at the West. The evidence of both men has been dismissed as unreliable by the CIA and by the US Defense Intelligence Agency and by subsequent official inquiries into the justification for the war.

Rose now also recognises that, in spite of the US conducting the most far-reaching criminal investigation in the history of humankind, there is still no evidence to support the INC's claim that Saddam Hussein's regime was involved in the attacks of 11 September 2001.

For most of the rest of his false leads, Rose relied on intelligence sources. His story linking Iraq to the anthrax attacks was put up to him by James Woolsey, a former director of the CIA, who was one of the first hawks to argue publicly that the 11 September attacks provided grounds to remove Saddam Hussein. In his 'Iraqi connection' story, Rose was steered by a senior official from the CIA who clearly did not agree with the analysts whose doubts were reflected by Mel Goodman. It was this official who persuaded Rose that there was 'significant Iraqi assistance and some involvement' in the 11 September attacks; and who provided Rose with two crucial contentions, both of which proved to be false.

First, this CIA source encouraged Rose to accept the claim, which had already been published elsewhere, that the supposed leader of the 11 September terrorists, Mohammed Atta, had flown to Prague in April 2001, five months before the attack, to meet an Iraqi intelligence officer, Colonel Mohammed al-Ani. Rose now accepts that this was wrong. There is fairly good evidence that Colonel al-Ani met an unknown young Arab man in Prague in April 2001; there is hard evidence that Mohammed Atta had visited Prague a year earlier, in June 2000; but there is no evidence that Mohammed Atta ever met Colonel al-Ani or any other Iraqi official in Prague or any other city.

The truth, as Rose subsequently came

Both the CIA and the INC were recycling the same uncorroborated information from the same poisoned source

to accept, is that Czech intelligence officers had information that Colonel al-Ani had been seen meeting a young man of Arab appearance who was never identified. When Mohammed Atta's face was broadcast around the world after 11 September, one Czech source said that he thought Atta could have been this young Arab. This uncertain identification was passed up the tree in Prague and then disclosed to US intelligence who shared it with US politicians who rapidly stripped it of its uncertainty and leaked it to the media as a stick with which to beat Iraq.

The CIA source passed this stick to Rose. Rose trusted him. It is notable that he went further than other journalists who wrote about Atta's alleged link to Colonel al-Ani in Prague, claiming that Atta had made not one but two trips to meet the Iraqi intelligence colonel; and that he was not the only suspected al-Qaeda member who met al-Ani and other Iraqi agents in Prague. There is simply no evidence to justify any of this, and we now know that two months before the invasion of Iraq internal CIA reports said analysts were 'increasingly sceptical' about the alleged meetings – scepticism which was not passed on to David Rose by his senior CIA source.

Second, this same CIA official fed Rose the line that two other, unnamed 11 September terrorists also had meetings with Iraqi intelligence officers in the spring of 2001, in the United Arab Emirates. Rose checked the story with the INC, who confirmed it and identified the two hijackers as Marwan al-Shehri and Ziad Jarrah. The CIA official then confirmed the names. Rose now accepts that this too was wrong. Both the CIA and the INC were recycling the same uncorroborated information

from the same poisoned source. Months later, when Rose complained to him, the senior CIA official backtracked fast and said this had been merely ‘a preliminary conclusion’.

The contribution of British intelligence to the ‘Iraqi connection’ story was more confused. Two different MI6 officers gave Rose entirely contradictory accounts of what was happening. Rose had dealt with MI6 before. Years earlier, in 1992 when the existence of the agency had been finally officially acknowledged by the British government, its then chief, Sir Colin McColl, had lunch with the then editor of the *Observer*, Donald Treford. McColl suggested that, in its new slightly public form, MI6 was willing to open up a formal channel to talk to the press and he asked if the *Observer* might like to appoint a reporter to liaise with the agency. Treford suggested David Rose, who was then the paper’s home affairs correspondent. That afternoon, Rose received a phone call inviting him to tea at the Ritz Hotel, where he met MI6’s first ‘director of public affairs’.

Rose had stayed in touch with MI6, enjoying an access which was denied to reporters who had not been nominated as official liaison points. By the time he came to write his Iraqi connection story, he had dealt with at least three directors of public affairs and had come to know several senior officers.

It was one of these operational officers who told him that ‘there was a view in MI6’ that Iraq was behind the 11 September attacks. However, when Rose went to the director of public affairs, he was told that that was not correct. Rose then went back to the operational officer who said that the official line was disinformation, designed to distance MI6 from a US policy

The idea that anonymous intelligence sources were unaccountable and prone to manipulate reporters was hardly news to Rose. Any experienced reporter knows that

with which they did not agree. Rose’s subsequent line in his story that ‘Whitehall sources made clear that parts of British intelligence had reached the same conclusion’ was designed to reflect this division, although it failed to capture MI6’s outright denial.

Looking back on all this in his short retraction in the *Observer*, Rose wrote: ‘To any journalist being offered apparently sensational disclosures, especially from an anonymous intelligence source, I offer two words of advice: *caveat emptor*.’

This does not quite deal with the issue. The idea that anonymous intelligence sources were unaccountable and prone to manipulate reporters was hardly news to Rose. Any experienced reporter knows that. (As we have seen, in Chapter 6, intelligence agencies have a history of involvement in feeding propaganda to the mass media.) Rose himself had heard an MI6 officer speaking quite openly about ‘using the press’; and, several years earlier, one of the MI6 directors of public affairs had tried to feed him a story about the former Nigerian dictator, Sani Abaja, investing money in Cambridge University – a story which Rose checked and found to be entirely fictitious. And yet, in the build-up to war, he recycled key claims which they made to him and which he could not check.

Rose now feels particularly bitter towards the senior CIA official who misled him, a man to whom he was introduced by a former CIA agent who recommended him as a reliable informant. Rose told me: ‘I have never come across a source who I assumed instinctively was the gold standard, because of his position, who I’ve felt so badly let down by. I thought this was an impeccable source, so I was predisposed to

believe him. If it hadn't been for him, I would never have been so inclined to believe the INC.'

The truth that scarcely dares to raise its head here is that most reporters routinely accept unchecked statements from official sources. This is the easiest method for PR and propaganda to enter the news. Some reporters sometimes, if they have the time, will try to check. In the early days of the campaign for war, the *Observer's* foreign affairs specialist, Peter Beaumont, ran a long analysis of the intelligence on Iraqi weapons, which was a model of sceptical reporting, laying out the claims and exposing their weaknesses as well as their strengths. But most reporters most of the time will reproduce what they are told by official sources, because they are 'predisposed to believe' them. Usually, this turns out to be a safe bet: even if the official story is wrong, it will look right because everybody else is running it; and usually it won't be proved wrong, because those who attack it will lack the instant credibility of the official sources who are backing it.

Rose's position with his pre-war stories, however, was particularly weak. Although he was following the consensus line on the threat from Saddam Hussein, he was more or less out on his own with much of the detail of what he was writing. His official sources were divided among themselves, and when he needed their support, they ran for cover. But most of all, he was wrong.

In part, perhaps, this goes back to the nature of the man, that he has all the self-confidence of great reporters but less of the judgement. His stories did not simply explore the evidence of Saddam Hussein's guilt. They persistently overstated the case

Being duped is a professional hazard but the cruel reality, as John Pilger put it in an interview about the reporting of the build-up to the Iraqi war, is that: 'Our job is not to be duped'

and then hunted down and battered some of those who opposed it. In retrospect, Rose admits that he signed up to a cause in which he believed and became too 'gung-ho'.

But the core point here is that ultimately the only secure defence for a reporter is to be right and provably so. If the reporter is obstructed – by personal weakness or by the nature of the organisation for which he works – he may suffer. Being duped is a professional hazard but the cruel reality, as John Pilger put it in an interview about the reporting of the build-up to the Iraqi war, is that: 'Our job is not to be duped.'

Rose misled his readers. He also misled his editor. However, in this of manipulation, Rose was not the only target, nor the only victim.

ROGER ALTON has never claimed to be a political animal. His style is too intense, bordering on manic, at best full of charm, at worst eyewateringly clumsy. His passions are far from government, much closer to sport and women, both of which he pursues with obsessive energy. In newspaper terms, he is a desk man, a brilliant subeditor who can project stories on a page, a good commissioner of interesting tales. But not political.

This was reflected in a story that went round the *Observer* newsroom after he was appointed editor in July 1998 and found himself being invited to go round to Downing Street for a quiet chat with the Prime Minister. 'Fuck,' said Alton, who swears when he breathes. 'I can't meet the Prime Minister. I'm just a fucking sub.'

In his anxiety, so the story goes, he turned to the *Observer's* then political ed-

itor, Patrick Wintour, and persuaded him to come with him to help him handle the conversation. So it was that a few days later, Alton turned up in Downing Street with Wintour by his side, and waited nervously outside the Prime Minister's study. David Miliband, then running the Prime Minister's policy unit, walked by and said hello to Wintour, who introduced him to his new editor.

'So, what sort of changes do you plan to make to the paper?' asked Miliband, who was evidently looking for some kind of political insight.

Totally bereft of an answer, Alton reverted to type, stammering: 'Bit more sex on the front page. More sport. That kind of thing.'

Alton's relative innocence in politics might not have become so important if Patrick Wintour had stayed at the *Observer* and continued to offer guidance. As it was, some eighteen months later, Wintour left to become political editor at the *Guardian*. Even then, things might have run smoothly if, as everybody expected, the job had passed to Wintour's deputy, Andy McSmith, an able and experienced political correspondent.

McSmith, however, was shocked a few weeks later to be phoned at home by Alton who told him that the job had gone to a journalist with no significant track record in political reporting, Kamal Ahmed, the *Guardian's* media editor. McSmith was so furious that he could barely speak and slammed the phone down on Alton. The next day he went to see him – insulted at losing the job; baffled that it had gone to a man who had no real experience at all of Westminster; aghast at the idea that he would have to take orders from somebody whom he was simultaneously teaching.

During Ahmed's first month in the Westminster snakepit, the *Observer* ran a sequence of stories which turned out to be misleading as various political back-stabbers passed the new political editor material without too much scruple about whether it was true or false

He asked his editor why he should accept this. 'Well, you'll be a better human being,' replied Alton in what may have been intended as a joke. McSmith resigned.

Now, the editor who lacked political experience had lost both his political editor and his political correspondent. And the new man, Kamal Ahmed, had even less experience of government than he did.

Alton was not worried: it would be a good thing, he argued, to open up the claustrophobic Westminster village by putting in a political editor who was not trapped in a web of loyalties. Ahmed was not worried: he had been a journalist for nine years and he was sure he could cope. But the difficulties were soon clear.

As soon as he started the new job, in April 2000, Ahmed struggled. He had no network of backbench contacts. He did not even know the basic routine in the House of Commons. One backbench Labour MP who had previously been a Cabinet minister was surprised to find that Ahmed was trying to set up a meeting for Wednesday at noon without realising that this clashed with Prime Minister's Questions, the most important slot in the weekly parliamentary diary. Some of the other political correspondents, possibly out of solidarity with the jilted Andy McSmith, made little effort to help him – even when they heard that Whitehall PR specialists were privately competing with each other to see who could slip Ahmed the biggest fib.

During Ahmed's first month in the Westminster snakepit, the *Observer* ran a sequence of stories which turned out to be misleading as various political back-stabbers passed the new political editor material without too much scruple about whether it was true or false.

Sources in Ireland told him that the Northern Ireland Secretary, Peter Mandelson, was being brought back to London during the coming summer. That ended up on the front page with a feature inside. It never happened: Mandelson stayed in Belfast until the following January when scandal forced him to resign.

A senior source in the Labour Party told him that Ken Livingstone, who was then running to become Mayor of London against the official Labour candidate, faced a special investigation for breaking spending rules in his campaign. That ended up on an inside news page. It never happened: the Labour Party produced no evidence of Livingstone breaking the rules, and there never was an investigation.

A source close to Gordon Brown told him there was to be 'a multi-billion-pound package of measures to tackle Britain's crippling transport crisis'. Some of this did happen. There really were two new tram schemes and some extra cash for the west coast mainline rail route. But the rest – all the other tram schemes, the double-decker trains, the super-interchanges where motorway traffic would switch to public transport, the motorway lanes reserved for buses – none of that happened at all. To add a little personal insult to editorial injury, according to a veteran political correspondent, Brown dispatched a civil servant to warn a senior journalist at the *Observer* that he was less than impressed by the new man's grasp of politics.

Soon, Ahmed was so depressed that he went to the executive editor, Andy Malone, and told him he wanted to resign. Malone persuaded him to stick with it a little longer. Ahmed did, and, since he is hardworking and ambitious, he came up with a solution to his problems. He made

'He was just like Alastair's jug,' according to a ministerial adviser who deals with the press. 'Alastair poured stuff into him, and he poured it out into the *Observer*'

friends with Downing Street and, in particular, with the Prime Minister's press secretary, Alastair Campbell.

This relationship was to become the source of great controversy. Some other political correspondents and some of Ahmed's colleagues at the *Observer* became alarmed that he was being used as a conduit for government announcements. 'He was just like Alastair's jug,' according to a ministerial adviser who deals with the press. 'Alastair poured stuff into him, and he poured it out into the *Observer*.' Ahmed, however, did not see it that way at all. He believed that it was part of his job to 'reflect government thinking' and that by getting close to Downing Street, he was picking up good stories for the paper.

Looking back at Kamal's coverage, you can see that certainly there were a lot of stories which simply announced government plans. Downing Street was under pressure over Europe, and it was Ahmed who announced the new European enforcer with 'sweeping powers' to control European policy across all departments. The government was in trouble over rising figures for violent crime, and it was Ahmed who announced 'sweeping new powers' for police to close down bad pubs. So, too, when the government was in trouble because GM seeds from Canada had contaminated crops in Britain; or when the government was in trouble because Oxford University had rejected a state school student even though she had six A levels: Ahmed was there to pass on the Downing Street line.

Ahmed's copy began to betray a striking enthusiasm for Tony Blair. When Campbell told him that the Prime Minister might take part in televised debates with other party leaders during the next election,

Ahmed opened his story with the words: 'He is the telegenic Prime Minister, the man who can be trusted to say the right thing in front of the cameras. Now it looks as though he could put his talents to good use.' When Campbell gave him advance notice of a controversial speech about the National Health Service, Ahmed said nothing about the intense opposition to government plans, only that 'Blair will spearhead a campaign to modernise the National Health Service. He believes the traditional establishment running it needs shaking up.'

In the *Observer* office Ahmed was soon a much more confident figure, brandishing his link to Alastair Campbell, perhaps merely as a joke, perhaps as a badge of power. Colleagues recall him blandly declaring at news conferences that he couldn't tell them what he would be writing for that week's paper until he had spoken to Alastair. 'In this job, you really only need one contact,' was a regular quip, they say. One journalist reported finding him lurking behind his shoulder as he was writing a story and Ahmed explaining, 'Alastair likes to know what we're all doing.' Ahmed insists he never said any of these things, although he does remember commenting on anti-government stories at conference, saying, 'Better get clearance for that.'

It is not that Ahmed was a government patsy. He did run some stories which embarrassed the government. But by choosing to see it as his job to 'reflect government thinking' inevitably he opened the door to a government which was highly adept at manipulating reporters and particularly keen to insert its message into the columns of the *Observer*, a paper which is read widely by Labour Party

By choosing to see it as his job to 'reflect government thinking' inevitably he opened the door to a government which was highly adept at manipulating reporters and particularly keen to insert its message into the columns of the Observer, a paper which is read widely by Labour Party members and backbench MPs

members and backbench MPs. Beyond that: on key issues, Ahmed personally and loudly supported the government; he was clearly excited by his contact with the Prime Minister, inclined to let slip that the PM had shared a beer with him or asked his opinion on something; and with Downing Street's help, he had survived his uncomfortable arrival in Westminster. The result was that some of Ahmed's colleagues warned the *Observer* news desk that the political editor seemed to be in danger of crossing the line from independent reporter to Downing Street's ally. One senior executive recalls the news desk rejecting some of his stories as 'government puffs' and urging him to include more material to challenge what he was being told by his official sources. It is clear he was not always checking the truth of what he was being given. In July 2000, he used the front page of the *Observer* to report that the government was about to give schools in England and Wales 'their biggest cash injection ever' – an extra £5.5 billion over three years. A simple check would have told him that that could not be true, since £5.5 billion was substantially less than the extra £9.7 billion which had been given to education for the previous three years. Early in the following year, he ran a front-page story about a speech which the Prime Minister was due to give to a party conference in Glasgow, predicting seven different points which he would make. If he had asked for an advance text of the speech, he would have discovered that six of these points were wrong. Alastair Campbell's deputy, Lance Price, later confessed that he had had only the vaguest idea what points the Prime Minister planned to make in his speech, so 'I'd made some up'.

But Ahmed stuck to his work, con-

vinced that he was right to stay close to the heart of government, reassured that he was landing good stories for the paper, and strongly defended by his editor, Roger Alton, who soon adopted Ahmed as a friend and as a political guide, to whom he turned for guidance and support.

And then the campaign for war began.

It was fascinating, but not surprising, when many months after the invasion, a leaked memo disclosed the thinking inside Downing Street. The memo was written to the Prime Minister by his foreign policy adviser, Sir David Manning, on 14 March 2002, summarising a conversation with the then US national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice: '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.'

As a single, particularly clear example of what this meant, we now know that, on the day after that memo was written, the Joint Intelligence Committee circulated a secret summary of its best information on Saddam Hussein's weaponry. This summary warned repeatedly that intelligence on this subject was 'poor', 'very little' and 'sporadic and patchy'. It went on to pitch the estimated threat at a conspicuously low level, reporting its judgement that Iraq had retained some biological agents, that 'it may retain some stocks of chemical agents', although the sources for this view were said by defence intelligence to be 'dubious', and that Iraq's earlier attempts to procure nuclear weapons had been frozen by sanctions. A parallel advice to ministers concluded that 'Saddam has not succeeded in seriously threatening his neighbours'.

Campbell stayed in regular contact with Roger Alton. There were times when Alton submitted copy to be included in leader comments which, other journalists believed, had come straight from Alastair Campbell's email messages

However, in the following two or three weeks, the need to 'manage public opinion' saw the Prime Minister give an interview to Australian television in which he delivered an unqualified warning, shorn of his intelligence agencies' doubts, that 'we know that he [Saddam] has stockpiles of major amounts of chemical and biological weapons'. He also told the House of Commons without equivocation that Saddam was 'developing weapons of mass destruction ... He is a threat to his own people and to the region.' And, on a visit to the United States, he boldly declared to reporters: 'We know he has been developing these weapons. We know that those weapons constitute a threat.' That last story ran on the front page of the *Observer*, under Kamal Ahmed's byline.

This was a dangerous time for the paper. It was one thing for the government to 'manage' right-wing newspapers, but the respected left-wing *Observer* – the newspaper that was read by the very Labour Party members and backbench MPs who were most likely to give the government a headache over the war – that really would be a prize. Senior journalists at the *Observer* say Alastair Campbell was dogged in his efforts to turn the paper around. Ahmed was a prime target. So, too, was his editor.

Campbell stayed in regular contact with Roger Alton. There were times when Alton submitted copy to be included in leader comments which, other journalists believed, had come straight from Alastair Campbell's email messages. The press secretary also arranged further informal chats for Alton with the Prime Minister himself, including an intimate lunch in the early autumn of 2000 from which, according to colleagues, Alton returned full of deter-

mined support for the campaign against Saddam. The previously nervous editor became so relaxed about his contact with the Prime Minister that he took to imitating Tony Blair at news conferences. When the Iraqi threat was discussed, he liked to put on his Tony voice and describe how he had seen things that made the hair stand up on the back of his neck. He also became more open about his own right-wing gut instincts, knocking back ideas which struck him as left-wing with a dig at one of north London's most notoriously sandal-wearing neighbourhoods: 'It's a bit Crouch End, isn't it?'

A more experienced or more cynical political editor might have steered Alton away from the government's line. As it was, Kamal Ahmed also became an open advocate in the office of the government's argument on Iraq. Both men accepted as true statements from Downing Street which were clearly calculated to mislead. Over the following months, as the momentum towards war gathered weight the *Observer* provided its readers with a steady dribble of falsehood and distortion, leaked into its columns from Downing Street.

At the next US summit, in September, the *Observer* reported a series of extravagant claims from the 'resolute' Prime Minister that Saddam had 'stocks of biological and chemical weapons that had not been accounted for'; that his weapons of mass destruction would be targeted at British interests; and that 'on the nuclear sites, there has been a lot of activity going on'. All this ran into the paper without qualification or criticism.

Blair was allowed to corroborate his claims by declaring: 'We only need to look at the report from the International

If the *Observer* had checked to make sure that the Prime Minister was telling the truth about this IAEA report, they would have found out that there was no such report. There was not even a report that the Prime Minister had misconstrued. There just was no IAEA report at all

Atomic Energy Agency this morning showing what has been going on at the former nuclear weapons site to realise that.' If the *Observer* had checked to make sure that the Prime Minister was telling the truth about this IAEA report, they would have found out that there was no such report. There was not even a report that the Prime Minister had misconstrued. There just was no IAEA report at all. There was a story in the *New York Times*, published the day before the Prime Minister made these remarks, and it did claim that 'a United Nations official said today that international weapons inspectors had identified several nuclear-related sites in Iraq where new construction or other unexplained changes had occurred since their last visit nearly four years ago'. In the classic churnalist pattern, that story had been picked up by Reuters and spread around the world. However, even as that was happening, the IAEA was denying it. From their headquarters in Vienna, they issued a statement which could not have been clearer: 'With reference to an article published today in the *New York Times*, the International Atomic Energy Agency would like to state that it has no new information on Iraq's nuclear programme since December 1998 when its inspectors left Iraq.' And yet, twenty-four hours later, in spite of that clear denial, the Prime Minister, with assistance from the front page of the *Observer*, was adding falsehood to falsehood.

In that same story, the paper recycled its briefing from Downing Street, that 'the Prime Minister believes public opinion over Iraq will harden with the publication tomorrow of a report by the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London'. Citing 'officials at Number 10', it faithfully reported that the ISS report would 'con-

concentrate on whether Iraq is supporting terrorist organisations around the world with weapons or finance'. If the *Observer* had checked to make sure that Downing Street was telling the truth about this report, they would have found out that, in fact, the ISS report had nothing at all to say on the subject of Iraq's supposed support for terrorist organisations. The *Observer* also claimed that the report would 'give details of Saddam's attempt to rebuild his nuclear capabilities since the ending of UN weapons inspections in 1998'. It didn't do that either. The ISS report did say that Saddam had had the opportunity to rebuild his nuclear capability and took it for granted that he would want to, but it offered no information at all on any attempts which he might have made to do so.

The same day saw the paper carry an admiring account of the Blair-Bush relationship which was 'so crucial to peace', confiding that, according to 'one No 10 official', even on his holiday the previous month, 'Tony read new evidence about Iraq pretty much every day'. Later that month, the *Observer* was one of a handful of papers who were given a Downing Street briefing which hyped the contents of a dossier on Iraqi weapons due to be published that week which, in turn, hyped the contents of intelligence reports which, in turn, were entirely wrong on crucial points. This ran on the front page, without qualification or criticism.

The paper went on to run an attack on the leading parliamentary opponent of the war, Robin Cook; a long interview with the Prime Minister, allowing him to switch the focus to domestic issues before his party conference; a declaration that 'post-Saddam Iraq' had been 'mapped out by the allies'; an announcement that the Prime

If journalism is also required to tell the truth, it makes no sense at all to carry this material without qualification or criticism or attempt to check its truth. But that is what happens

Minister was sending Lord Guthrie to Turkey as 'a safe pair of hands' to ensure their support; and an attack on the views of the then Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, who had fallen out of step with Downing Street; as well as regular repeats of the government's certainty that 'we know he has WMD'.

All of these stories were substantially the work of the government, engineering coverage to 'manage public opinion'. All of them carried Kamal Ahmed's byline. Some of them contained significant falsehood or distortion.

However, it needs to be said that this is not just about Ahmed. Other *Observer* reporters contributed to these stories. *Observer* executives, particularly the editor, chose to publish them. Beyond that, although Ahmed may have developed a special enthusiasm for Downing Street, media outlets all over the world were also running false and distorted stories.

It is squarely within the conventions of modern journalism to report the speeches and comments of political leaders and to reproduce material selected and provided by their PR staff. It is clear that if journalism is required to focus its attention on the behaviour of the state, then that makes sense. But if journalism is also required to tell the truth, it makes no sense at all to carry this material without qualification or criticism or attempt to check its truth. But that is what happens.

Taken together with David Rose's flawed reporting, Downing Street's work with Kamal Ahmed and Roger Alton meant that *Observer* readers were slowly soaked in disinformation. But, just as important, the newspaper's own internal thinking was stained, too. Senior journalists at the paper say there was a perception

that some reporters were ‘on message’ while others were not. ‘A barrier prevented some stories getting prominence,’ according to one. ‘There was definitely a circle of resistance that I felt was wrong.’

It was against this background that the paper repeatedly rejected Ed Vulliamy’s stories about Mel Goodman and his discovery of the truth about what CIA analysts were saying about the supposed threat from Saddam Hussein. Looking back now, it is clear that there was a horrible continuum here: the process of distortion which Mel Goodman was trying to expose was precisely the same process which had infiltrated the *Observer*’s reporting and thinking and which led to Goodman’s own expose being rejected. And, as we will see, there were further, equally worrying incidents in the weeks immediately before the invasion.

It should be said that this was not some kind of Stalinist censorship. The *Observer* did run anti-war columns on its comment pages. Some anti-war stories did make it onto the news pages; some of them were important. But the reality is that, as a result of sustained and often subtle manipulation, the paper was being steered in a direction which it would not otherwise have taken. This finally became unavoidably clear on Sunday morning, 19 January 2003, when the *Observer* formally came out in favour of war.

A long leader, which considered the arguments on both sides, concluded: ‘We find ourselves supporting the current commitment to a possible use of force.’ Notably, this leader accepted the American contention that Saddam possessed weaponry which posed a threat to the wider world; and furthermore it supported the Americans in their willingness to use force

Readers reacted with a torrent of letters. Some supported the leader, but many were angry, a mood captured by one who wrote: ‘I couldn’t believe my eyes when I read your weaselly, disgraceful, morally and intellectually dishonest editorial, in which you support Blair’s Iraq policy’

even if they lacked the backing of the UN Security Council.

Readers reacted with a torrent of letters. Some supported the leader, but many were angry, a mood captured by one who wrote: ‘I couldn’t believe my eyes when I read your weaselly, disgraceful, morally and intellectually dishonest editorial, in which you support Blair’s Iraq policy’. Some in the newsroom felt equally strongly. They acknowledged that there was a reasonable and honourable argument for removing the Iraqi dictator to end his repressive rule, but they worried that this particular leader comment was taking a line which betrayed the newspaper’s historic principles, as though somebody had crept in and stolen their moral anchor. Journalists on the *Observer*’s daily sister paper, the *Guardian*, were angry, and some of them raised it at a subsequent staff meeting with Liz Forgan, the chair of the Scott Trust which owns the *Guardian* and the *Observer*.

There are some at the *Observer* who believe that this leader was the product of some subtle manoeuvring in the office. During the week before it appeared, at the regular Wednesday conference, Roger Alton had made his own pro-war view clear. A day later, he had taken aside a senior journalist who would be involved in deciding the final leader line and asked him: ‘Would it be controversial if we took this line?’

The journalist wasn’t sure what he meant. ‘You mean an anti-war line?’ ‘No, no,’ said Alton. ‘We’ve got to stand shoulder to shoulder with the Americans.’

Having thus advertised his own position, Alton then took the unusual step of failing to turn up to the main leader conference on Friday, at which the paper’s

final line would be decided. He said it was just bad luck; he had something else he had to do. There are some who believe he was being much cleverer than that – that he had made it clear what he wanted and that, by staying away from his own leader conference, he made it impossible for opponents to challenge him. And they noted that the first draft of the leader was written not by one of the regular leader writers, but by David Rose, who worked directly for Alton, not for the news desk.

Six senior *Observer* journalists gathered that Friday to make the decision. Only one of them – the political columnist Andrew Rawnsley – spoke in favour of the American plan, and, since Rawnsley habitually saved his best shots for his own column, his impact was limited. One other, Ben Summerskill, remained neutral, because it was his job to write the leader that emerged. The other four – the former editor and economics columnist Will Hutton, the acting comment editor Barbara Gunnell, the regular columnist Mary Riddell and the deputy editor Paul Webster – were all more or less opposed. And yet they sanctioned the leader along the lines which the absent editor wanted.

It may be that this was a victory for subtle manoeuvring. But the real difficulty for the six journalists at that meeting was that, with the best will in the world, like so many other journalists, they didn't really know what they were talking about. How could they? The *Observer* had not only failed to discover the truth for itself about the Iraqi threat but, working on a particularly difficult and well-observed subject, it had been manipulated into believing significant falsehoods. The reality is that, like so many journalists, they did not know what was true; they merely thought they did.

Ridley was approached by a woman who claimed to be working at the Government Communications Headquarters in Cheltenham. Since GCHQ is a highly secret spying organisation, which specialises in intercepting all forms of communication, Ridley was suspicious, fearing this might be some kind of trap.

ANOTHER funny thing happened a few weeks after that leader was written, although the chain of events had begun unnoticed several months earlier, in November 2002, at an anti-war meeting in Bristol.

One of the speakers at that meeting was Yvonne Ridley, a former Sunday Express journalist who had become the subject of a world news story in September 2001, when she was reported to have been taken hostage by the Taliban as US forces prepared to invade Afghanistan. Subsequently, she had converted to Islam and become an outspoken peace campaigner and political activist.

As the meeting in Bristol ended, Ridley was approached by a woman who claimed to be working at the Government Communications Headquarters in Cheltenham. Since GCHQ is a highly secret spying organisation, which specialises in intercepting all forms of communication, Ridley was suspicious, fearing this might be some kind of trap. She told the woman she would leave her business card for her on a shelf in the room and, if ever she wanted to talk, she could phone and introduce herself as 'Isabelle'.

Three months later, in early February 2003, Isabelle called. Ridley arranged to meet her, in Patisserie Valerie in Soho. They made small talk for a while, and then Isabelle handed over a piece of paper. Ridley read it. 'Bloody hell,' she said.

The document was an email which appeared to have come from the National Security Agency, the US equivalent of GCHQ, an organisation so secret that it has been nicknamed the No Such Agency. It suggested that, a few days earlier, the NSA had started spying on six key members of the Security Council of the United Nations. These were the six countries

whose support the United States needed if it was to pass its famous 'second resolution' endorsing military action against Iraq. The document recorded an NSA instruction that, in breach of international law and in spite of all diplomatic protocol, the six delegations were to have all phone calls from their homes and offices recorded and their email traffic intercepted and copied.

Realising that police would try to trace the source of the document, Isabelle had cut off the header at the top of the email, but she allowed Yvonne Ridley to scribble out some details from the header on to the back of the piece of paper.

Ridley saw that this was an enormously important story. Conceivably, it could even change the outcome of the UN Security Council's vote on the second resolution. Her first move was to take it to Chris Hughes, a senior journalist at the Daily Mirror. Hughes, however, was unable to confirm that the document was genuine and so, three days later, he couriered it back to her, and she took it to Martin Bright, the home affairs editor at the *Observer*, with whom she had dealt in the past. This caused several problems.

The first problem with the story was simply to confirm that it was true. Bright worked with the foreign affairs specialist, Peter Beaumont, and the US correspondent, Ed Vulliamy, trying to find intelligence sources who would confirm that this spying operation was taking place or, failing that, at least to find confirmation that the man who was said to have sent the email from the NSA, Frank Koza, did indeed exist and was indeed in a position to be organising such an operation.

The second problem was the 'circle of resistance' to anti-war stories. As soon as the three reporters started work on the

Kamal Ahmed was particularly sceptical. According to one source: 'He was running around the office going, "Hitler diaries, Hitler diaries,"' reviving the memory of the humiliation of the Sunday Times in 1983 when they published a forgery claiming to be the diary of Adolf Hitler. He may or may not have been joking

NSA document, some senior executives started airing their doubts about it. They said Yvonne Ridley was an unreliable source. They drew attention to the fact that the header had been cut off. Kamal Ahmed was particularly sceptical. According to one source: 'He was running around the office going, "Hitler diaries, Hitler diaries,"' reviving the memory of the humiliation of the Sunday Times in 1983 when they published a forgery claiming to be the diary of Adolf Hitler. He may or may not have been joking.

By now, there was some ill feeling in the office between Ahmed and reporters who opposed the war. A few weeks earlier, at the end of January, there had been a controversial incident on the Prime Minister's plane as he flew to Washington DC. A group of political reporters were flying with him at the back of the plane, and several noticed that Alastair Campbell emerged from the front section, where he was sitting with the Prime Minister, and called Ahmed forward to join them. Nobody would have known what passed between them if Ahmed had not returned to the office in London in the following week, claiming that Campbell had shown him a new summary of alleged intelligence on Iraqi weaponry and consulted him on how best to use it as a media story. This summary was what came to be known as the 'dodgy dossier'.

The dossier in itself was immediately a source of trouble for Ahmed. He, along with other political reporters in the Prime Minister's party, found it slipped under their hotel doors in Washington in time for them to file stories for their papers on Sunday 2 February. In his story that day, Ahmed described it as 'new intelligence documents released by Downing Street'

and went on to say that it was ‘based on information from MI5, MI6 and the Security Services’. In fact, it was nothing of the kind. It was a collection of a few scraps of raw intelligence with a hearty mix of publicly available material which had been downloaded from the Internet and hyped by Downing Street press officers. We now know that intelligence agencies complained bitterly that their names were being used to give credibility to assessments which they had never seen. The foreign secretary, Jack Straw, was particularly alarmed that he knew nothing of the dossier until he read about it in the papers.

In filing a false story, Ahmed was in the same trouble as other reporters that weekend who once again had been misled by Downing Street. However, in allowing himself to be consulted about the dossier by the Prime Minister’s press secretary, Ahmed was on his own. As word of Ahmed’s involvement spread through the *Observer* office, some of his colleagues started asking hostile questions. Was it right for an independent reporter to get into that kind of relationship with the government? And if the Prime Minister’s press secretary had to have some feedback from a reporter, why did he choose Kamal Ahmed?

When the sheer dodginess of the dossier eventually became clear, the news desk asked Ahmed to write a story about it, focusing, among other things, on the fact that he had been asked his opinion about it while not even the intelligence agencies who were supposed to have written it or the Foreign Secretary himself had been consulted. Ahmed then denied emphatically that he had given Campbell any advice on the dossier and refused to write about it.

At the sixth attempt, on the same day that Ahmed ran his misleading story about the dodgy dossier, Ed Vulliamy had finally managed to slip a small fraction of his story from the CIA veteran Mel Goodman into the paper – as the final two paragraphs of a 1,200-word story on page 16

This incident encouraged the perception that Ahmed had crossed the line from independent reporter to Downing Street aide. This was reinforced when word spread through the office that, as the paper was being prepared on Saturdays, Ahmed was regularly phoning Alastair Campbell to read out extracts from the news list with the result that the government would be aware of any controversial stories which the paper was planning to run the next day. This was in no way normal behaviour for a journalist. Ahmed insists that this never happened. But I have spoken to one of his colleagues who has no doubt at all that he personally and repeatedly witnessed Ahmed doing precisely this.

It was against this background that Martin Bright, Peter Beaumont and Ed Vulliamy were trying to confirm that the NSA had been intercepting phone calls from the six key members of the Security Council. *Observer* staff say they have a clear memory of Kamal Ahmed making it very clear that he thought that the story should not appear, ‘dropping poisonous stink bombs’ as one journalist put it. This was clearly spooking Roger Alton, who was worried about the story, not so much because it was anti-war in its implications but because he felt it was unsafe: this was not an anodyne story from an official source but an explosive allegation which might blow up in his face.

Beyond that, several senior sources felt that the paper’s strong line in favour of the war was now infecting editorial judgements. At the sixth attempt, on the same day that Ahmed ran his misleading story about the dodgy dossier, Ed Vulliamy had finally managed to slip a small fraction of his story from the CIA veteran Mel Good-

man into the paper – as the final two paragraphs of a 1,200-word story on page 16. And these senior figures noted that while pro-war stories had been allowed to float into the paper without being properly checked, the NSA story was being subjected to an intense grilling.

Two weeks passed. The three reporters on the NSA story had reached the point where, after speaking to intelligence experts, they believed the document was genuine, but still they could not get their story into the paper. Then Vulliamy talked his way through the NSA switchboard and, to his delight, found himself speaking to the office of Frank Koza. He managed to confirm that Koza was the NSA's Defense Chief of Staff, responsible for regional targets, and was indeed in a position to write an instruction like this.

Even now, the story was stalled. Late on Saturday afternoon, 1 March, Roger Alton was still fretting about whether or not to run it, until Peter Beaumont took him out into the stairwell of the office and made it very clear that the story was checked and solid and had to run. Alton agreed.

The story finally appeared the following day, 2 March. The front-page headline declared: 'SECRET DOCUMENT DETAILS AMERICAN PLAN TO BUG PHONES AND EMAILS OF KEY SECURITY COUNCIL MEMBERS'.

It named Angola, Cameroon, Chile, Mexico, Guinea and Pakistan as targets of the spying.

Some who were involved felt frustrated by the delay in finally getting the story into print: 'If we had gone with it two or three weeks earlier, it might have made a difference. There was an ideological resistance to it. It could have stopped the war. And that's why the document was leaked

Some who were involved felt frustrated by the delay in finally getting the story into print: 'If we had gone with it two or three weeks earlier, it might have made a difference. There was an ideological resistance to it. It could have stopped the war. And that's why the document was leaked to us'

to us.' (That week, police arrested Katherine Gunn, a twenty-eight-year-old worker at GCHQ, who had provided the document which 'Isabelle' took to Yvonne Ridley.)

But the problems in the *Observer* office were not yet over.

In New York, Vulliamy started talking to senior delegates from some of the six nations who were being spied on. He turned the conversation round to their plans for voting on the second resolution. This was a supremely important vote. Without it, the United States and its allies would lack the legal and political cover which they had sought for their invasion. Just as important in the British context, without that resolution, the Prime Minister risked losing his own vote which was due in the House of Commons. His support within the Labour Party was crumbling. Four Cabinet ministers and six parliamentary aides were on the point of resigning their posts. Backbench MPs were in rebellious mood. Downing Street needed that resolution. Or, at the very least, they needed the party to continue believing that the resolution would be passed.

Five of the fifteen nations on the Security Council had already declared they would vote against the resolution. If three others joined them, the US and UK could not get the majority they needed. Talking to the delegates of the six key nations, Vulliamy discovered that Chile, Mexico and one other who spoke on condition of anonymity had already decided to vote against. The resolution would fail. He filed his story from New York, for the paper of Sunday 9 March.

In the London office, however, Ahmed spoke to Alastair Campbell in Downing

Street. Ahmed had already written a story several weeks earlier helpfully reporting about the resolution that ‘Britain is certain it will be passed, not unanimously, but probably 13-2, with Syria and Germany against’. This was part of a concerted media campaign on both sides of the Atlantic to pretend that all was well at the UN. Now Campbell told Ahmed that, contrary to what Vulliamy was filing, they still expected the UN resolution to go through and they were still working on the six key nations. Then Tony Blair phoned Roger Alton.

Ahmed and the deputy editor, Paul Webster, were called into Alton’s office to join the conversation on the speakerphone. Blair reassured them that there was no problem with the second resolution. It was a ‘keep your peckers up conversation’, according to one source. The three executives emerged from Alton’s office, laughing that Blair had said ‘Hey, guys’ so many times that it might have been Rory Bremner on the other end of the line, impersonating the Prime Minister.

The next day, 9 March, the *Observer* carried a front-page story about the progress of the UN resolution, written by Kamal Ahmed. It made absolutely no reference at all to Vulliamy’s first-hand findings from the key nations. Instead, it told

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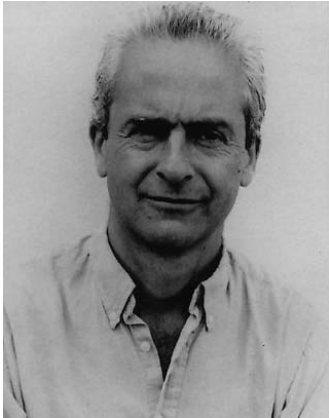
Observer readers: ‘Downing Street was bullish last night about the chances of getting the required nine votes to pass the resolution. Sources close to Blair said that all the diplomatic effort would be aimed at persuading the key “middle six” countries – Pakistan, Angola, Cameroon, Guinea, Mexico and Chile – to support the resolution.’

A longer story by Ahmed inside the paper also was written as though all six of the key nations remained undecided. ‘The British Government is confident it can persuade enough [to come] on board,’ it said, before adding one single line which reflected what Vulliamy had filed. ‘Noises from the UN are less certain,’ it said.

Events proved that Vulliamy’s unpublished story was right. The Prime Minister and his press secretary were wrong (and, courtesy of intercepting phone calls at the UN, had every reason to know they were wrong). And the *Observer*’s story was also wrong.

On that same weekend, Vulliamy filed for the seventh and final time his story about Mel Goodman and the CIA, quoted at the beginning of this chapter. That, too, failed to make it into the paper.

Eleven days later, in the early hours of Thursday 20 March, London time, the first air-raid siren wailed over Baghdad. **CT**



The Author

Nick Davies writes investigative stories for London's Guardian newspaper and has been named Journalist of the Year, Reporter of the Year and Feature Writer of the Year in British press awards. Apart from his work on newspapers, he also makes television documentaries and he has written four books, including *White Lies*, which uncovered a racist miscarriage of justice in Texas; *Murder on Ward Four*, which examined the collapse of the NHS through the murder of children by Nurse Beverly Allitt; and *Dark Heart*, a journey through the wasteland of British poverty. He has three children and lives in Sussex.

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"For too long the missing piece in the jigsaw of great power has been the part played by Western journalism in promoting the Big Lie, such as the lie that led to the bloodbath in Iraq. This brilliant book by Nick Davies, unrelenting in its research, ruthless in its honesty, is a landmark expose by a courageous insider. All those interested in truth – outsiders and insiders – should read it." – **John Pilger, author and media critic**

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