

Why Did 'Intelligence' Fail Britain and America in Iraq?

Written by Nicholas Lawrence Adams

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NICHOLAS LAWRENCE ADAMS, JUL 25 2012

The British and American intelligence failure over Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) is one of the most intensely scrutinised in recent times. The amount of literature both in the academic and journalistic world is vast. In the UK and US there were numerous public and governmental inquiries into the reasons for failure. Despite this there is still a debate as to the cause of the malfunction. The official investigations concluded that it was due to analytical shortcomings within the intelligence community which caused the wrong assessments to be made. While the investigations found that the policymakers overstated the facts to gain public support for war, there was no politicising of the intelligence and no individual responsibility for the failures has been identified. However, the prevailing explanations in the official reports are laced with bias as they are influenced by individuals, organisations and partisan politics. The intelligence community shouldered the blame for the failure after no WMD were found and many politicians stated that they would not have voted for war if they had not been 'mislead' by faulty intelligence. Yet this interpretation overlooks the foundation of intelligence in which it should be a supporting element, not a driver of policy. The prominence of using intelligence assessments to justify war was without precedent. Bush and Blair have repeatedly said that they would have gone to war even if Iraq did not possess WMD capabilities. If this is the case, and the danger was a regime with a history of aggressiveness, then intelligence errors were irrelevant. Therefore it is the intention of this discussion to demonstrate that the decision to go to war in Iraq was not a consequence of the current intelligence on the WMD threat, that decision had already been decided in the upper echelons of the policymakers. Yet this should not obscure the fact that the intelligence was largely inaccurate and played a significant role in the coalition's presentation for war. The reasons for failure lie in a complicated mixture of analytical failures, overstatement, misinterpretation and an overreliance on previous knowledge. The case for war in Iraq was pushed for in a top down fashion which created an environment within the intelligence community destined for failure. As Robert Jervis argues, "the intelligence failure was not responsible for the invasion because the administration would not be deflected by new information as it had already decided on a pre-emptive policy."^[1]

Failures in intelligence are quite an ordinary occurrence. The business of intelligence is to discover secrets which are intended to be kept as such. Even then intentions exist in an elite minority which are subject to rapid change and uncertainty. Carl von Clausewitz stated that, "Many intelligence reports are contradictory; even more are false, and most are uncertain".^[2] However, critics often assume that because so much money is spent on intelligence, particularly in the US at \$50 billion annually, intelligence failures are due to negligence, treachery or stupidity.^[3] This is not the case, yet the difference with the intelligence failure in Iraq is that politicians used it to justify a pre-emptive war. Michael Fitzgerald even goes as far as to say that the word 'intelligence failure' is a political distraction encouraged by politicians to shift the blame for the Iraq war to the intelligence services.^[4] However, the obvious intelligence failure in regards to Iraq's WMD capabilities is the difference between the estimates and the reality. The CIA estimate in October 2002 stated that Iraq continued its WMD programme after the Gulf War in 1991 and had chemical and biological weapons with missiles in excess of UN restrictions and would probably have a nuclear weapon by the end of the decade.^[5] All this proved to be false, albeit with some missiles slightly in excess of the UN restrictions. The failure was epitomised in January 2004 with the head of the hunt for WMD, David Kay, calling off the search declaring, "We were all wrong".^[6] The explanations for failure are not due to one factor, indeed a myriad of aspects caused the wrong conclusions to be drawn with both politicians and analysts to blame.

The nature of the relations between Iraq and the UK and US in the aftermath of the Gulf War is important as it gives

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the context for understanding the excessive confidence in the assessments derived by intelligence analysts on Iraq's WMD capabilities. The discovery of a highly advanced WMD programme and infrastructure of facilities in the wake of the liberation of Kuwait was a shock and surprise to the coalition forces. The intelligence agencies had severely underestimated Iraq's capabilities and had missed important indicators. This would not be forgotten. In the future, when it came to assessing Iraq, there was the tendency now to overestimate the threat due to this previous experience, the regimes refusal to abandon efforts and the continued hostility between Iraq and the West. Intelligence analysts knew they were not seeing a full WMD programme from their current intelligence, but this was easy to explain away by Iraq's previous campaigns of denial and deception. The lessons of 1991 were reinforced by experiences with UN weapons inspectors as machinery for such programmes had been hidden or even buried. Analysts also knew that training had been given to Iraq by the USSR which had developed elaborate schemes to conceal biological weapons from the West.[7] Throughout the 1990's the intelligence community assumed Iraq had maintained WMD expertise, capabilities and stockpiles.[8] This continued even in the face of evidence in 1995 from the defection of Hussein Kamil, Saddam's son in law, who stated that Iraq's WMD had been destroyed.[9] This refusal to consider alternatives to existing beliefs would prove to be disastrous. Kamil's testimony was chosen to be ignored and instead repeatedly cited as evidence, in the run up to the 2003 war, that Iraq had produced unconventional weapons, even though Kamil believed all weapons to be destroyed. In the context of obvious guilt, analysts shifted the burden of proof to require evidence that Iraq did *not* have WMD and therefore erected a theory based on assumption which almost could not be destroyed.

Raimond Gaita argues that the explanation for the push for war and intelligence failure was due to the influence of neo-conservatism.[10] He is not alone in his assessment and his argument raises some interesting points regarding the politicisation of intelligence. The advocacy for a war to ensure regime change in Iraq predated George W. Bush's administration. A new form of intellectual neo-conservatism began to flourish after the collapse of the USSR left the US as the dominant superpower of the world. A pre-emptive ideology formed in which challenges to US dominance would be blocked by use of force. Towards the end of the Bush administration in 1992, Paul Wolfowitz, a leading architect of this worldview, circulated a document around the Pentagon in which there was a strong emphasis on using military force to prevent the proliferation of WMD in countries such as Iraq.[11] He also later advised Bush that a way to win support for a pre-emptive war against Syria would be by, "drawing attention to its WMD programme." [12] This demonstrates the willingness to manipulate intelligence to support policy and foster public support. Wolfowitz and other intellectual neo-conservatives would later become influential leading figures in the future George W. Bush administration with an opinion already formed on what to do regarding Iraq. Therefore when it came to viewing intelligence on Iraq, the majority of the Bush administration had already decided on what course of action to take. A particularly striking example is the fact that several of the intellectual neo-conservatives advocated action against Iraq within hours of the 9/11 attacks, including Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz and Dick Cheney.[13] 9/11 was a particularly poignant moment for a strategic shift in American politics. While the neo-conservatives were happy to promote pre-emptive war before 9/11, they were very much a minority voice. The majority consensus was to pursue a doctrine of containment. 9/11 changed the political landscape and gave a mouthpiece for the policy advocacies of the neo-conservatives. Bush's State of the Union address in January 2002 demonstrates this strategy shift to the targeting of states seeking to acquire WMD, and identifies Iraq, along with Iran and North Korea as belonging to an "axis of evil". [14] Worst-case analysis now gained credibility and led to the doctrine of pre-emption during 2002. A scenario was envisaged in which Al-Qaeda looked to Iraq as a potential supplier of WMD. This shift was also apparent in the UK with this scenario at the heart of the case for war and can be found in Blair's speeches. For example in March 2004 he stated, "...it is a matter of time unless we act and take a stand before terrorism and WMD come together, and I regard them as two sides of the same coin." [15] Therefore with this ideological zeal guiding the politics, it can be argued that the decision makers were blinded by ideology with the decision to go to war already made.

Many commentators after the war claimed that the intelligence was politicised by overstatement and the selection of evidence to fit the case. Yet to prepare a public for a war there is a tradition of overstatement. For example, in 1947 President Truman was advised that if he wanted to take on communism and persuade the American people then he would have to "scare the hell out of them." [16] However the prominence of using intelligence assessments to justify war was without precedent. The US and UK assumptions that Iraq hoarded WMD in a deployable form struck a significant cord of fear within the public. An *IJSS Strategic Dossier* regarding Iraq's WMD capabilities, published in

Why Did 'Intelligence' Fail Britain and America in Iraq?

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September 2002, was tentative but assuming about the large amounts of WMD located in Iraq.[17] Tony Blair, acutely conscious of public reaction, noted the impact that the IISS dossier had on the public and asked the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) to prepare a public presentation of the intelligence and evidence for war.[18] The resulting document became known as the 'dodgy dossier' and fuelled the debate in the UK surrounding the politicisation of intelligence. The document itself claimed "Iraq had the capacity to deploy chemical weapons in 45 minutes." [19] This highly suggestible statement caused confusion in the public to what it actually referred to and led BBC reporter Andrew Gilligan to claim that an unnamed source within the British intelligence community stated that the intelligence was 'sexed up' to meet the political need for war. These claims were further compounded by the leak of a Downing Street memo in 2005, in which Sir Richard Dearlove, chief of SIS, says that, "the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy." [20] In the US more serious claims were made that intelligence analysts were put under pressure to conform to the line of the government and change assessments until the 'right answer' was reached.[21] While these claims were cleared in official reports, the inherent uncertainties and ambiguous nature of the process in which intelligence is turned into assessments for political purposes is not an exact science or immune to political and institutional bias. For these reasons, the political pressure seriously undermined the intelligence capabilities and contributed to the intelligence failure. As Alex Danchev argues, "Conflation, exaggeration and obfuscation served to build pressure for pre-emption". [22]

In the aftermath of the war with the failure to locate any WMD in Iraq, numerous official reports in the UK and the US were established to find the cause of the intelligence failure. Unfortunately the official investigations were marred by political bias and excessive hindsight. The reports cleared the politicians of any individual blame and instead found the cause in the breakdown of the intelligence cycle. In the US, the *Senate Select Committee on Intelligence* (SSCI) concluded that the intelligence process failed and no inappropriate pressure was put on the intelligence community by the Bush administration.[23] Similarly the *WMD commission* calculated that the failure was due to 'analytical shortcomings', with analysts too embedded in their assumptions of Saddam's intentions.[24] In the UK there were four investigations. The first, the *Foreign Affairs Committee* (FAC), offered no decent analysis as the government refused to cooperate with Alasdair Campbell hijacking the hearings to pursue his personal vendetta against the BBC correspondent Andrew Gilligan.[25] Interestingly though Robin Cook, the former Foreign Secretary, stated his view that the conviction of the decision makers for war meant that they selected evidence which fitted the case instead of using intelligence to base a conclusion of policy.[26] The judicial inquiry by Lord Hutton considered the accuracy of the claims in the September dossier but exonerated the government stating, "The Prime Minister's request of a document consistent with the available intelligence, but as strong as possible in relation to the threat may have subconsciously influenced those drafting the wording to be somewhat stronger than normal." [27] The final report, the *Butler Report*, by far the most comprehensive concludes that the poor quality of HUMINT on Iraq after 1998 was to blame. While the report states that the '45 minute' claim should not have been put in the government dossier without explaining what it referred to, the majority of the blame lies with the intelligence agencies and not the government.[28] The reasons for the failure offered in the reports, while true to some extent, gloss over the accountability of the role of the politicians who gave inaccurate accounts of intelligence to gain political support.

However, the reports do highlight some important reasons for failure and much blame lies within the intelligence community itself. Richard Kerr argues that the poor intelligence resulted from a reduction in the post-Cold War era of a professional collection management cadre capable of integrating HUMINT, IMINT and SIGINT capabilities into coherent strategies.[29] This resulted in an increase in the separation of collection and analysis personnel who were involved in identifying collection gaps, priorities and collection strategies. In the period of crisis in the months leading up to the war there was an increase in demand for intelligence. Most of the intelligence came in the form of policy driven memos and briefs written for daily publications. The result was a narrow focus with piecemeal intelligence which neither fostered a continuity of analysis nor provided a context within to place unrelated information. There was too much certainty in the assessments made by analysts. While some of the evidence indicated that Iraq possessed WMD, there was not enough to sufficiently prove it beyond doubt. For example the 2002 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) in the US was produced too quickly and reflected first impressions from recent information. The finished intelligence did not accurately convey levels of certainty to the consumers and therefore allowed a false confidence in the intelligence. Jervis conveys his view that the analysts were influenced by a desire to please policymakers by being able to reach firm conclusions rather than the usual possibilities and estimates.[30] There was a failure on the behalf of the intelligence community to communicate effectively with the policymakers. The false

Why Did 'Intelligence' Fail Britain and America in Iraq?

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analysis offered brimmed with confidence because the conclusions were deducted from Iraq's behaviour and the motives were assumed to be consistent with said behaviour.

The poor quality of the HUMINT was a significant factor that led to the intelligence failure. It is not clear how many sources the US had, but the UK only had five, none of whom claimed firsthand knowledge of the WMD programmes. The analysis relied on out of date information acquired largely before 1998 through UN weapon inspectors and was influenced by long held assumptions. Poor target development meant that analysts had to rely on the accounts of a handful of Iraqi dissidents, each with their own agenda. One source of HUMINT codenamed 'Curveball' proved to be one of the most significant intelligence failures. His account of mobile chemical and biological laboratories turned out to be a complete fabrication, yet it was seized upon by the US administration as strong evidence. 'Curveball' later claimed that he made the story up so that Saddam would be removed from power. The failure of the intelligence services to pick up on his motives exhibits desperation for a lack of HUMINT available at the time. The best information could have come from Iraqi scientists themselves and with a better analysis the result would have been to make the judgements less certain and perhaps a fundamentally different conclusion.[31] Michael Fitzgerald argues that because the quality of the HUMINT was so dire, the intelligence was 'cherry picked' and 'stove piped'. [32] Supporting evidence for Iraq's WMD programmes, such as the aluminium tubes which matched the dimensions for a nuclear centrifuge, were allowed to rise through the intelligence cycle quickly and bypassed normal procedures of internal review.[33] The evidence of 'Curveball' had been dismissed as a fabrication by some CIA analysts yet it appeared in Colin Powell's speech before the UN Security Council on 5 February 2003. A mixture of political pressure and analysts being too embedded in their assumptions of Saddam's intentions allowed these grave intelligence failures to happen.

Amongst the literature on the subject (and in the official reports), a consistent argument for the reason for intelligence failure is the fact that the intelligence community suffered from insufficient imagination. Especially in regards to Saddam's behaviour as no alternatives were considered and alternative competing hypotheses (ACH) were not utilised. This was true not only in the intelligence community, but also with observers, including opponents of the war who proposed no serious alternatives. Why was it that Hussein Kamil's testimony on the destruction of the WMD's was not seriously considered, yet 'Curveball's' testimony went straight to Colin Powell's desk? If the intelligence services had adequately used the ACH method then, potentially, alternative theories regarding Saddam's behaviour could have been established. There was indeed a rationale for Saddam to encourage his opponents to believe he had WMD. Surrounded by regional rivals including Iran, whom Iraq had fought a long bitter war with, uncertainty regarding his WMD capabilities would help deter other countries from attacking and would give Iraq more regional and international clout. FBI interrogation after his capture suggests this as Saddam was worried inspections would "expose Iraq's vulnerability in comparison with Iran." [34] Saddam even went as far as to say to his own government that Iraq possessed WMD to instil confidence and ensure regime stability. Dr Gary Samore, director of the IISS, stated at the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee that he believed Saddam had miscalculated and tried to provide enough cooperation with the inspectors to keep the UN Security Council divided and deny a UK/US rationale for war, but not so much cooperation that he truly opened up and gave up the capabilities he was hiding.[35] However, analysts in the UK and US suffered from a confirmation bias because they were assessing Iraq in the context of obvious guilt and therefore they tended to look for information which confirmed what they believed.

Confirmation bias occurred at every stage of the intelligence cycle, from requests to the field for information, to what was reported and not reported and even what analysts paid attention to. The negative evidence was easy to explain away due to the previous experience with Iraq's campaign of denial and deception. However the evaluation of 'accuracy' and quality of judgement within the uncertain world of political security and military forecasting is complex, particularly when assessing WMD programmes. Colin Wastell claims there are two modes of human reasoning, natural and systematic.[36] Natural reasoning accumulates information useful to living in social groups and is prone to experience and procedures tagged by emotional associations, it is usually an unconscious first response.[37] Systematic reasoning is a slower sequential processing and the individual is conscious when using this mode to allow for a description of the stages of reasoning.[38] Ideally then the intelligence analysts should have been trained in this and employed this tactic. Unfortunately this method can be applied incorrectly and the individual may have used the natural method before the systematic became engaged. For example the "one per cent" doctrine of Vice President Dick Cheney, which stated that if there was any chance of danger, no matter how small, then all effort had

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to be used to prevent harm, led to some analysts to interpret their information in terms of an emotional contagion.[39] Therefore it can be argued that no political pressure was required for analysts to come to conclusions consistent with the prevailing fear of politicians over Iraq's WMDs. However, there was coercion from the governments on the intelligence agencies to find evidence which supported a case for war. This pressure, whether actual or implied, strongly contributed to the intelligence failure over Iraq's WMD programmes.

Throughout this discussion it was argued that the decision to go to war was not a consequence of the intelligence regarding Iraq's WMD. First and foremost this was not an intelligence driven crisis. The decision to go to war had already been made. The root cause can be traced from the shift in how the West perceived itself after the end of the bipolar world with the fall of the USSR. The threat that Iraq posed was merely the first and very public test of this new worldview. That is not to say that intelligence did not matter. Intelligence had a significant impact on the public presentation for war. Furthermore, the intelligence regarding Iraq's WMD was faulty due to serious shortcomings within the intelligence community. A failure in imagination, a lack of willingness to contemplate other alternatives and an overreliance on poor quality intelligence led to one of the most publically dissected intelligence failures in recent times. Combined with a political will to impose the status quo through the use of force, Iraq severely tested, but did not entirely destroy this new form of strategic rational.

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Why Did 'Intelligence' Fail Britain and America in Iraq?

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Why Did 'Intelligence' Fail Britain and America in Iraq?

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Why Did 'Intelligence' Fail Britain and America in Iraq?

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