

The Importance of the Chilcot Report for International Relations Scholars

Written by Piers Robinson

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2016/08/15/the-importance-of-the-chilcot-report-for-international-relations-scholars/>

PIERS ROBINSON, AUG 15 2016

The Chilcot Report has delivered severe criticisms of the way in which the British government took Britain to war in Iraq in 2003 and generated, at least for a sort time, widespread media criticism of Tony Blair as well as other officials. Chilcot made clear that war was not the last resort, that more time should have been given to the UN weapons inspections, that the way in which Blair established the legal basis for war was far from satisfactory, that planning for post invasion Iraq was inadequate and that Blair had failed to fully engage his cabinet and other officials in the decision-making process. For scholars of IR, what are the most important insights emerging from the Chilcot Report?

In the very broadest terms, Chilcot has highlighted the mismatch between the official and public justifications for war and the actual reality of foreign policy formulation. Recognition of this mismatch has profound implications for debates over democracies and war, and the nature of the global 'war on terror' that has dominated the international landscape since 9/11. Specifically, although the report was careful to avoid any accusation that officials deliberately mislead people with regard to the war, it has presented a significant amount of information which supports the thesis that the British (and American) governments engaged in a strategy of deception in order to mobilize support for war. Regarding the widely criticised use of intelligence and allegations of manipulation, Chilcot confirmed that intelligence officials were at fault for allowing an exaggerated and misleading impression of the threat posed by Saddam's weapons of mass destruction to be communicated to the public. The report states: 'Intelligence and assessments made by the JIC about Iraq's capabilities and intent continued to be used to prepare briefing material to support Government statements in a way which conveyed certainty without acknowledging the limitations of the intelligence (Chilcot Report, Section 4.3, p. 290). It also states that the 'the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) had a responsibility to ensure that key recipients of its reporting were informed in a timely way when doubts arose about key sources, and when subsequently intelligence was withdrawn' (Chilcot Report, Section 4.3, p. 290) but that they had not done so on important occasions.

At the same time, Chilcot also places blame on Blair himself for over-interpreting the intelligence in his public announcements. The report states:

The statement that Mr Blair believed Iraq and its weapons of mass destruction was "a current and serious threat to the UK national interest" reflected his view. But it did not reflect the view of the JIC, which had addressed the threat posed by Iraq and assessed that Iraq's capabilities and intentions were limited and related to the balance of power in the region and internal challenges. (Chilcot Report, Section 4.2; p. 247).

Also, in a particularly revealing and arguably damning statement, Chilcot states that Blair had embarked upon a strategy of what was effectively misrepresentation right from the start. Chilcot writes: 'The tactics chosen by Mr Blair were to emphasise the threat which Iraq might pose, rather than a more balanced consideration of both Iraq's capabilities and intent ... That remained Mr Blair's approach in the months that followed'. However, having confirmed that both intelligence officials and Blair himself were involved in inaccurate representations of the intelligence, and even stating that this was a 'tactic', thereby implying awareness and intentionality on the part of Blair, Chilcot avoids characterizing this as deception or questioning Blair's good faith.

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But the most damning revelation concerns the historical starting point for Chilcot. As the early parts of the report make clear, the genesis of British involvement in the Iraq War lay in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 when elements within the US administration sought to take advantage of the event in order to pursue a long standing objective of toppling Saddam Hussein. The report also quotes a British embassy report dated 15 September 2001, which states that 'The "regime-change hawks" in Washington were arguing that a coalition put together for one purpose (against international terrorism) could be used to clear up other problems in the region.' (Chilcot Report, Section 3.1, p.324). The report then cites Blair's considerations with respect to the emerging 'war on terror' strategy:

... in order to give ourselves space that we say: "Phase 1 is the military action focused on Afghanistan because it's there that the perpetrators of 11 September hide.

Phase 2 is the medium and longer term campaign against terrorism in all its forms. Of course we will discuss that ... This kicks it away for the moment but leaves all options open. We just don't need it debated freely in public until we know what exactly we want to do; and how we can do it.

Mr Blair concluded that a "dedicated tightly knit propaganda unit" was required, and suggested that he and President Bush should "talk soon". (Chilcot Report, Section 3.1, p 338). By December 2001, Blair appears to have signed up to the objective of regime change in Iraq:

Mr Blair told President Bush that he was not opposed to the removal of Saddam Hussein, but an extremely clever plan would be needed (Chilcot Report, Section 3.1, p. 367).

Mr Blair suggested a strategy for regime change in Iraq that would build over time which would permit military action to be taken "if necessary, without losing international support. (Chilcot Report, Section 3.1, p. 368).

Chilcot reiterates the point again in his conclusions:

Mr Blair's discussion with President Bush on 3 December and the paper he sent to President Bush the following day represented a significant development of the UK's approach. Mr Blair suggested a "clever strategy" for regime change in Iraq that built over time, until the point was reached where "military action could be taken if necessary", without losing international support (Chilcot Report, Section 3.1, p. 82).

In a nutshell, the Chilcot report appears to provide important evidence in support of the thesis that the 'war on terror' has been exploited in order to 'clear up other problems' and that, as a part of this, Western publics have been manipulated and deceived via propaganda, a clever strategy and exaggeration of the threat posed by Saddam's alleged WMDs.

So what are the implications of all this for IR scholarship? First and foremost the specific evidence regarding the origins of British involvement with the US policy of regime change decidedly opens up the need for a full investigation by mainstream academics with regard to the strategic backdrop to the 'war on terror' and the Iraq war, the involvement of neoconservative aspirations regarding power and influence in the Middle east and questions surrounding resources and oil. There should not be any hesitation about this for scholars of IR. There is now considerable evidence in the public domain, including from official sources such as the Chilcot Report, which point toward the 'war on terror' having been at least one component of a broader geo-political strategy. Moreover the 'war on terror', which continues to this day, has obscured and obfuscated much of the power politics that have been playing out in the world. Getting to grips with the political reality underlying the 'war on terror' is now a research priority for scholars of IR. The case of Iraq and the manipulation and deception involved also has important implications for the democratic peace thesis. This thesis maintains that democracies are war averse partly because of the ability of domestic media and publics to hold their governments in check. Clearly, however, it is problematised by the possibility that governments might engage in deceptive propaganda when promoting a war: obviously, if a government is engaging in deception it becomes more difficult for meaningful public debate.

Third and finally, the role of propaganda and deception surrounding the invasion of Iraq, and indeed the broader 'war

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on terror', should highlight the critical role of what I have described elsewhere as *organised persuasive communication* (historically called propaganda) and its centrality to the exercise of power. What the case of Iraq shows clearly is the depth and penetration of such activities and how important they are in terms of creating and enabling policies. Looking back now at the invasion of Iraq, and knowing both that there was no usable WMD in the country, and in the knowledge that Iraq was a country decimated by year of sanctions, it seems extraordinary that the British and American governments were able to, fairly successfully, promote a line that the country had a significant and threatening WMD capability. Academics from across all of the social sciences would do well to engage more fully with the processes by which power is exercised through organised persuasive communication and manipulative propaganda.

About the author:

Piers Robinson is Professor of Politics, Society and Political Journalism, at the Department of Journalism Studies, at the University of Sheffield. His current research explores organized persuasive communication and contemporary propaganda as well as the role of communications and media in relation to international politics. He is author of the *CNN Effect: the myth of news, foreign policy and intervention* (2002, Routledge, London and New York) and co-author of *Pockets of Resistance: British News Media, War and Theory in the 2003 Invasion of Iraq* (2010, University of Manchester Press).