

Proof Bush Fixed The Facts

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Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [FAKE INTELLIGENCE](#)

“Intelligence and facts are being fixed around the policy.”

Never in our wildest dreams did we think we would see those words in black and white—and beneath a SECRET stamp, no less. For three years now, we in Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS) have been saying that the CIA and its British counterpart, MI-6, were ordered by their countries’ leaders to “fix facts” to “justify” an unprovoked war on Iraq. More often than not, we have been greeted with stares of incredulity.

It has been a hard learning—that folks tend to believe what they want to believe. As long as our evidence, however abundant and persuasive, remained circumstantial, it could not compel belief. It simply is much easier on the psyche to assent to the White House spin machine blaming the Iraq fiasco on bad intelligence than to entertain the notion that we were sold a bill of goods.

Well, you can forget circumstantial. Thanks to an unauthorized disclosure by a courageous whistleblower, the evidence now leaps from official documents—this time authentic, not forged. Whether prompted by the open appeal of the international Truth-Telling Coalition or not, some brave soul has made the most explosive “patriotic leak” of the war by giving London’s Sunday Times the official minutes of a briefing by Richard Dearlove, then head of Britain’s CIA equivalent, MI-6. Fresh back in London from consultations in Washington, Dearlove briefed Prime Minister Blair and his top national security officials on July 23, 2002, on the Bush administration’s plans to make war on Iraq.

Blair does not dispute the authenticity of the document, which immortalizes a discussion that is chillingly amoral. Apparently no one felt free to ask the obvious questions. Or, worse still, the obvious questions did not occur.

Juggernaut Before The Horse

In emotionless English, Dearlove tells Blair and the others that President Bush has decided to remove Saddam Hussein by launching a war that is to be “justified by the conjunction of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction.” Period. What about the intelligence? Dearlove adds matter-of-factly, “The intelligence and facts are being fixed around the policy.”

At this point, Foreign Secretary Jack Straw confirms that Bush has decided on war, but notes that stitching together justification would be a challenge, since “the case was thin.” Straw noted that Saddam was not threatening his neighbors and his WMD capability was less than that of Libya, North Korea or Iran.

In the following months, “the case” would be buttressed by a well-honed U.S.-U.K.intelligence turned-propaganda-machine. The argument would be made “solid” enough

to win endorsement from Congress and Parliament by conjuring up:

Aluminum artillery tubes misdiagnosed as nuclear related;

Forgeries alleging Iraqi attempts to obtain uranium in Africa;

Tall tales from a drunken defector about mobile biological weapons laboratories;

Bogus warnings that Iraqi forces could fire WMD-tipped missiles within 45 minutes of an order to do so;

Dodgy dossiers fabricated in London; and

A U.S. National Intelligence Estimate thrown in for good measure.

All this, as Dearlove notes dryly, despite the fact that “there was little discussion in Washington of the aftermath after military action.” Another nugget from Dearlove’s briefing is his bloodless comment that one of the U.S. military options under discussion involved “a continuous air campaign, initiated by an Iraqi casus belli”—the clear implication being that planners of the air campaign would also see to it that an appropriate casus belli was orchestrated.

The discussion at 10 Downing St. on July 23, 2002 calls to mind the first meeting of George W. Bush’s National Security Council (NSC) on Jan. 30, 2001, at which the president made it clear that toppling Saddam Hussein sat atop his to-do list, according to then-Treasury Secretary Paul O’Neil, who was there. O’Neil was taken aback that there was no discussion of why it was necessary to “take out” Saddam. Rather, after CIA Director George Tenet showed a grainy photo of a building in Iraq that he said might be involved in producing chemical or biological agents, the discussion proceeded immediately to which Iraqi targets might be best to bomb. Again, neither O’Neil nor the other participants asked the obvious questions. Another NSC meeting two days later included planning for dividing up Iraq’s oil wealth.

Obedience School

As for the briefing of Blair, the minutes provide further grist for those who describe the U.K. prime minister as Bush’s “poodle.” The tone of the conversation bespeaks a foregone conclusion that Blair will wag his tail cheerfully and obey the learned commands. At one point he ventures the thought that, “If the political context were right, people would support regime change.” This, after Attorney General Peter Goldsmith has already warned that the desire for regime change “was not a legal base for military action,”—a point Goldsmith made again just 12 days before the attack on Iraq until he was persuaded by a phalanx of Bush administration lawyers to change his mind 10 days later.

The meeting concludes with a directive to “work on the assumption that the UK would take part in any military action.”

I cannot quite fathom why I find the account of this meeting so jarring. Surely it is what one might expect, given all else we know. Yet seeing it in bloodless black and white somehow gives it more impact. And the implications are no less jarring.

One of Dearlove’s primary interlocutors in Washington was his American counterpart, CIA director George Tenet. (And there is no closer relationship between two intelligence services than the privileged one between the CIA and MI-6.) Tenet, of course, knew at least as much as Dearlove, but nonetheless played the role of accomplice in serving up to Bush the kind of “slam-dunk intelligence” that he knew would be welcome. If there is one unpardonable sin in intelligence work, it is that kind of politicization. But Tenet decided to be a “team player” and set the tone.

Politicization: Big Time

Actually, politicization is far too mild a word for what happened. The intelligence was not simply mistaken; it was manufactured, with the president of the United States awarding foreman George Tenet the Medal of Freedom for his role in helping supervise the deceit. The British documents make clear that this was not a mere case of “leaning forward” in analyzing the intelligence, but rather mass deception—an order of magnitude more serious. No other conclusion is now possible.

Small wonder, then, to learn from CIA insiders like former case officer Lindsay Moran that Tenet’s malleable managers told their minions, “Let’s face it. The president wants us to go to war, and our job is to give him a reason to do it.”

Small wonder that, when the only U.S. analyst who met with the alcoholic Iraqi defector appropriately codenamed “Curveball” raised strong doubt about Curveball’s reliability before then-Secretary of State Colin Powell used the fabrication about “mobile biological weapons trailers” before the United Nations, the analyst got this e-mail reply from his CIA supervisor:

“Let’s keep in mind the fact that this war’s going to happen regardless of what Curveball said or didn’t say, and the powers that be probably aren’t terribly interested in whether Curveball knows what he’s talking about.”

When Tenet’s successor, Porter Goss, took over as director late last year, he immediately wrote a memo to all employees explaining the “rules of the road”—first and foremost, “We support the administration and its policies.” So much for objective intelligence insulated from policy pressure.

Tenet and Goss, creatures of the intensely politicized environment of Congress, brought with them a radically new ethos—one much more akin to that of Blair’s courtiers than to that of earlier CIA directors who had the courage to speak truth to power.

Seldom does one have documentary evidence that intelligence chiefs chose to cooperate in both fabricating and “sexing up” (as the British press puts it) intelligence to justify a prior decision for war. There is no word to describe the reaction of honest intelligence

professionals to the corruption of our profession on a matter of such consequence. "Outrage" does not come close.

Hope In Unauthorized Disclosures

Those of us who care about unprovoked wars owe the patriot who gave this latest British government document to The Sunday Times a debt of gratitude. Unauthorized disclosures are gathering steam. They need to increase quickly on this side of the Atlantic as well—the more so, inasmuch as Congress—controlled by the president's party—cannot be counted on to discharge its constitutional prerogative for oversight.

In its formal appeal of Sept. 9, 2004 to current U.S. government officials, the Truth-Telling Coalition said this:

We know how misplaced loyalty to bosses, agencies, and careers can obscure the higher allegiance all government officials owe the Constitution, the sovereign public, and the young men and women put in harm's way. We urge you to act on those higher loyalties...Truth-telling is a patriotic and effective way to serve the nation. The time for speaking out is now.

If persons with access to wrongly concealed facts and analyses bring them to light, the chances become less that a president could launch another unprovoked war—against, say, Iran.

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